

Meaningless Data. Information Delivery and Truth-telling

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| abstract

The paper aims to describe the information-delivering practice performed by whistleblowers in order to clarify the narrative role they denote in contemporary information warfare. This operation will affirm the semiotic dissolution of the meaning of revealed data in whistleblowers' discourses compared with the linguistic meaning of the information delivered. To support this statement, by adopting a semiotic standpoint I will focus on the pragmatics of information delivery. Depending on the context, the information-delivering act performed may be articulated as a provided or a subversive one. Subsequently, using two semiotic squares, the whistleblowers' information-delivering practice will be compared with those that define acts of espionage, trolling and fear-mongering: these positional roles of information delivery will be described on the basis of the *law/crime* and *saying/doing* semantic oppositions.

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Introduction. Digital media semiotics fleeing computer sciences

For many reasons that the context of a scientific article does not allow us to address adequately in-depth, it is possible to assume that intellectual reflection on digital media distinguishes between those that, adopting the perspective of the computer sciences, are concerned with explaining the “medium” and its procedural and computational nature from a materialistic standpoint, and those that, adopting the perspective of the human and social sciences, observe and measure the implications of the gradual sedimentation of digital media in the social, cultural, economic and legislative issue within which users and scientists are inevitably immersed. Although this is a very coarse and purely subjective distinction, nonetheless it can be useful to identify the role that semiotic science may play in the epistemological challenge I am introducing.

Certainly, semiotics can describe and explain the phenomenon of whistleblowing. This expression means the act of signalling illicit attitudes in legislated contexts or revealing and leaking secret and compromising information. Nowadays whistleblowers play an important role in bringing to light issues of corruption or suspicions of wrongdoing that may threaten the public interest and, in all the countries that recognise this role, whistleblowing has enabled the protection of fundamental common interests, as well as the recovery of substantial public resources.

However, which of the previous two epistemological perspectives should be adopted?

The whistleblowing act mainly concerns socio-semiotic contexts, so the answer could be the second one. Semiotics is the science of myths, narrations and confabulations: not so much about their history as their linguistic structures. The tradition that developed from the studies of Propp (1928), Greimas (1970), Floch (2006) and Ferraro (2012) – which accounted for the generative dynamics of meaning in socio-cultural contexts – can today be applied to comprehending the socio-semiotic facets of the experience with digital media. One of the purposes of the article will be precisely that of understanding the narrative role of the whistleblower from a socio-semiotic perspective, by investigating its meaning through the comparative analysis of different narrative roles that can be assumed as pertinent and similar to it.

At the same time, the narrative role of whistleblowers leads us to focus on the *information-delivering practices* performed by them. This is also a very pivotal issue from a socio-semiotic perspective. In this second view, the materialistic perspective may prove useful. Information delivery, which is a practice, is certainly not new to semiotics. Since the time of Roman Jakobson (1960), semiotics has been collated with the information sciences and, in particular, with Shannon and Weaver's theory (1948). Moreover, compared to the purely social sciences, semiotics has always defined its object of study as "sign" or "text", i.e., something which is tangible and concrete.

However, if we try to put together the two epistemic perspectives before exposure to the phenomenon of whistleblowing, an interesting semiotic dynamic occurs.

In the narrative scheme enabled by the information-delivering practices performed by whistleblowers, computational information (i.e., data) seems to lose its proper linguistic meaning. In this regard, one could consider the issue of so-called "information overloading", using it to denote not just the gradual and natural accumulation of information in archives, databases and storage (Blair, 2011), but also the consequent scepticism deriving from such an accumulation and such multi-perspective communication of information.

The focal point that I would like to focus on in this venue concerns the socio-semiotic dynamics that articulate this information-delivering practice as a *revelation* or *unveiling* of a certain *secret truth*. In describing the patterns of truth-telling action in mythology, Lida Maxwell proposed thinking of a *homeostatic context*, in which the whistleblower's intervention produces a *significant event*: "they offer their societies what I call *insurgent truth*: a kind of truth that does not stabilise society by offering pre-political facts but instead unsettles society by showing that the social ground is already rough, exclusive, and often lopsided" (Maxwell, 2019, p. xii).

It is therefore by starting from the study of such *insurrectional* phenomena, from a narratological perspective, that it is possible to understand the functioning of the relocation of the experience of truth (understood as "revelation"), which in contemporary culture, as theorised by Peppino Ortoleva (2019), finds expression in "low-intensity myths". To this end, it is possible to analyse the speeches of several public figures who have been received or self-described as "whistleblowers": I will here consider Edward Snowden, Christopher Wyle and Chelsea Manning.

In whistleblowers' discourses, items of information are moved (i.e., deterritorialized) out of their natural machinic environment and become objects of value in cultural myths. In such a perspective, the so-called practice of "whistleblowing" can be read in terms of a *form of symbolic practice* (or *form of life*) insofar as it is, concretely, *information delivery*

and, at the same time, a cultural myth with heterogeneous facets which – and herein lies the characterising element – assigns to computational language a more utopian and symbolic value than a practical and linguistic one.

As we shall see, the intervention of the whistleblower, at least as it has been thematised in media culture, helps interpret the act of *delivering information* and, in the meanwhile, understand the semiotic dynamics by which such information loses its linguistic meaning to become an object of value in the information overload narrative. Just as texts written in computational language often appear abstruse to semiologists, who are only able to grasp the dynamics at a systemic level, so it is in the process of interpreting information delivered by whistleblowers, where the meaning of the gesture replaces that of the strictly textual level.

The paper's objective will be that of discussing the meanings emerging from information delivered by whistleblowers as well as *the loss of meaning* occurring in the information deterritorialization related to such practices.

For this reason, I will adopt a semiotic perspective. On the one hand, semiotics is the science of signs, languages and information. Besides, whenever we approach computational information, the difference in substance and grammar that characterize it concerning the more usual verbal language becomes clear and sometimes problematic. Semiotics does not aim to explain computational information from a strictly linguistic point of view: it is a task already accomplished by computer sciences. In this direction, an interesting contribution has been developed by software studies and critical code studies (Fuller, 2005; Cramer, 2005) which, however, has not been sufficiently elaborated within the scientific and academic reflection.

On the meaninglessness of data

Before getting to the heart of the semiotic analysis of whistleblowing practices, a brief clarification of the concept of *meaninglessness* is mandatory.

The implicit statement contained in the title of the paper is not meant to be a mere provocation: in recent years, several scholars have put forward fully concordant ideas about the potential meaning of data (Treleani & Compagno, 2019).

Besides, the study of whistleblowing involves focusing on the data as an *object of value* within a socio-semiotic scenario.

In the current theoretical perspective, it is possible to exclude the inextricable immanent linguistic meaning of data from the analysis, to focus, instead, on their *transcendental* and pragmatical meaning, which allows us to grasp their meaninglessness. Here, the concept of meaninglessness is not to be understood so much as linguistically meaningless and undecipherable, but rather as *meaningless and uncanny*, insofar as it is something whose semantic and pragmatic functioning are both ignored, disclosing a textual form which scares precisely on account of the impossibility of recognising its genesis. Recently, Massimo Leone (2020) has proposed a “semiotics of insignificance”, considering both the processes of signification and communication. In this sense, the information delivered by whistleblowers is not *semantically* meaningless, although in most cases either such information is too complex to be decoded, or it is meaningless because it is decontextualised; more specifically, the meaning of illicitly possessing sensitive data does not coincide with the level of the potential content of such data.

Moreover, the systemic pragmatics that describes the performative action of the



whistleblower is always articulated in a dialectical way, by adopting the themes of secrecy and conspiracy, resulting in an information overload in which it is no longer the texts nor the implicit writing practices that produced such texts that signify but rather the *second level discourse* enunciated by an authoritative actor, such as a national newspaper, which plays the function of an observer actant.

In this view, whistleblowers could be said to have recovered the ontology of mass media criticism of the 1960s, becoming a sort of “prophets”. From a linguistic point of view, the term *prophet* derives from the Latin *propheta*, which in turn comes from the Greek *prophētēs*; it literally means “the one who speaks in front of”, and is therefore the bearer of a happy ambiguity, since it can be used both in the sense of speaking *publicly* (in front of listeners), and therefore being an orator, and in the sense of speaking in the name and on behalf of (in place of) God, and therefore being His spokesman (Volli, 2016, p. 280). In particular, the whistleblowers’ “prophetic” quality lies in their discursive claim to developing a belief and faith in something that is intrinsically intangible and unverifiable, which ultimately is believed as true only on the basis of the fact that its truth is re-enunciated by influential actors, such as important newspapers. In this view, whistleblowers’ discourses are different from those which require solid scientific proof to be believed.

Hence, although the linguistic meaning’s loss of data is not a necessary condition for affirming the cultural myth of the whistleblower, especially in the case of data leaks and data breaches, the meaning of such “hyper-objects” (Morton, 2015) for people – i.e., for the social group that created, shared and stole the object – is the pragmatic and operational one, or at least it is more relevant than the linguistic one.

Semiotics of whistleblowing

In order to understand the strictly linguistic meaninglessness of information delivered by whistleblowers, the following chapter will aim to compare different semiotic figures of whistleblowers, highlighting inconsistencies and ideological meanings that these figures carry with them.

The thematic figure of the whistleblower is asserting itself in the *geopolitical and legislative discourse*: it appeared for the first time in US jurisprudence and for a long time it has been confined just to English-speaking countries; recently, the European Union has also adopted laws for the protection of these subjects.

Although contemporary data leaks and data breaches may be thought of as contemporary forms of whistleblowing, their roots can be traced back to the XIV century. It is possible to describe and consider similar practices in the ancient Venetian republic, where around 1300 special containers came to be installed around the city, especially near the Doge’s Palace, to collect secret complaints addressed to the magistrates and the Council of Ten. Despite a passing resemblance to the Roman marble mask which was legendary for its ability to bite the hands of those who lied, this was a distinctively Venetian custom.

As reported by Robert Sparling:

The practice of secret denunciation was a longstanding tradition in a number of northern Italian republics, but its most famous instance was the *bocca di leone* in the republic of Venice. These were letterboxes carved in the form of grotesque heads (often of lions, though

sometimes of men) into the mouths of which one could drop anonymous accusations against officials and fellow citizens. The most well-known Venetian “lion’s mouth” can be found at the Doge’s palace bearing the inscription, “Denontie secrete contro chi occultera gratie et officii o colludera per nasconder la vera rendita d’essi” [“Secret denunciations of anyone who hides favours and services or who colludes to hide their true income”] (Sparling, 2020, pp. 414-15)



Figure 1. The lions’ mouths in Venice.

In 1387, it was decided that secret denunciations could not be anonymous; in 1542, it was decreed that denunciations for blasphemy had to contain the names of at least two witnesses, or else be destroyed. These laws did not, however, apply to denunciations of conspiracies against the state, a crime considered supremely dangerous for the stability of the Republic’s political system. If these rules appear bizarre, it is because they have to be read in the context of a rigid legislative system that did not consider this practice from the point of view of the citizen’s benefit.

Whenever a citizen of Venice detected an infringement, she could file a grievance. After the grievance was filed, a “trial” in the form of a public hearing took place. If the accusation proved to be correct, the wrongdoer was draconically punished. However, if the allegation turned out to be false, it was not the accused who was punished, but rather the accuser. The latter would receive the same punishment that the accused would have received if the allegation would have been true (Uhlmann, 2021, p. 152).

Although the author’s point of view is mostly oriented towards economic and legal logic, Uhlmann’s article proposes some expressions that are worth reflecting on. First of all, Uhlmann defines whistleblowing as the act of “providing non-public information about a potential violation of the law to authorities or the public”, which leads one to consider the legislative *contract* (in the semiotic sense) that the accuser had to accept at the time of reporting the infringement – and which today is somehow reflected in the social and techno-cultural contract that one accepts to participate in network space. Indeed, in the era of information warfare, whistleblowers raise the spectre of universal surveillance and the arbitrary power associated with the worst totalitarian excesses.

Moreover, the figure of the whistleblower is also becoming established in *journalistic discourse*, where sensationalist tones often prevail; often such discourses are aimed at recounting heroic and Promethean feats that always develop around the same narrative scheme: a person, most humble and without any particular ambition, becomes a witness to unlawful acts that affect a potential figure of millions of people, and in which he/she is somehow actively involved. Faced with this dilemma, the whistleblower acts

by betraying his/her group, stealing the object of value that constitutes the proof of the wrongdoing that has taken place.

The journalistic discourse has also been echoed by the cinematic and literary discourses that have translated the whistleblowers' stories into the narrative form: the doc-film *Citizenfour* (Poitras, 2014) and the bio-pic *Snowden* (Stone, 2016) is linked to the figure of Snowden and the NSA scandal, as is the novel *Permanent Record* (Snowden, 2019); *Mindf*ck. Cambridge Analytica and the Plot to Break America* (Wyle, 2020) and the film *The great hack* (Amer & Noujaim, 2019), as well as a series of articles, video interviews and public testimonies, focus instead on Christopher Wyle.

After these evolutions, the cultural figure of the whistleblower has come to be thought of as analogous to the mythological one concerning Internet crimes.

Briefly, we could describe the persona of the information activist as exercised by a version or versions of information freedom; it voices commitments of various liberal stripes to access and transparency, more often than not subscribing to a hacker ethos of information wanting to be free. [...] One characteristic of this persona as performed or personified by Assange is precisely its constitutive but contradictory relation to the *topoi* of secrecy; another is that it is peculiarly structured by its relation to WikiLeaks, of which Assange becomes the face (Munro, 2015, p. 45).

Within this framework, the narrative role of the whistleblower inserts itself in conspiracy stories, provoking bewildering paradigm shifts and publicly exposing files and data labyrinths within convoluted news write-ups, whose meaninglessness seems to update the postmodern imagery of the collective paranoia described by De Lillo.

The cases of Edward Snowden, Christopher Wyle and Chelsea Manning are interesting precisely insofar as they allow for an evolution of the semiotic figure of the hacker – by now stereotyped and modelled on the profile of Julian Assange. They allow us to describe the newest dynamics of meaning-making which are only partly determined by the linguistic content of the information delivered by the whistleblower.

Indeed, contemporary laws on whistleblowing as well as journalistic discourses have started to recognise the ambiguity of this legal role, so that the institution's interests in protecting people often collide with the possibility of their own "secrets" being denounced.

[...] whistleblowers are protected by general laws to a certain extent. Often whistleblowing is perceived as behaviour falling into the scope of the fundamental right of freedom of expression (e.g., in Estonia, France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Portugal). [...] However, almost all jurisdictions surveyed balance this right against the legitimate protection of public interests or business secrets. Whistleblowers are often bound by a contractual or statutory duty of loyalty which limits their right to blow the whistle, as it obliges them to confidentiality to a certain extent (Thüsing & Forst, 2016, p. 8).

In this perspective, the reasons for the mythologisation of popular whistleblowers start to emerge.

In June 2013, Edward Snowden, a computer scientist at the NSA, met Glenn Greenwald, a journalist from The Guardian, in Hong Kong, and handed over highly secret documents about mass surveillance programmes implemented by the US and British governments. After declaring his identity in front of documentary filmmaker Laura Poitras' camera (in what would later become the 2014 docu-film *Citizenfour*), Snowden

began his odyssey in search of political asylum, which ended in Russia, where he was allowed to reside until 2020. Through a stereotyped critique of contemporary society – which recalls, at least in terms of content, Adornoian rhetoric on the culture industry and constitutes a sort of martyrdom in its provocation of the tyrant – Snowden's statements define a polemical structure within which the opposing actor is the NSA (and governments and institutions in general), dystopian and manipulative, responsible for a conspiracy of which the addressee is also a potential victim.

The same can be said for Wyle and Manning. Christopher Wyle, like Snowden, was personally involved in espionage practices in one case and monitoring and manipulation in the other, which were subsequently denounced. This denunciation coincided with the realisation of the same narrative pattern as Snowden's: in March 2018, Wyle sent *The Guardian* documents incriminating Cambridge Analytica of illegally possessing sensitive data of millions of users. This episode was followed by interviews for *The Observer*, appearances in the docu-film *The Great Hack* and the writing of *Mindf*ck*. Here, right from the title, it is possible to highlight the polemical intent of his testimony, which was confirmed by transversal pronouncements in which Wyle repeatedly lashed out against Steve Bannon, who was responsible for the secret project at Cambridge Analytica.

Chelsea Manning was accused of violating the Espionage Act by sending Julian Assange a series of sensitive, military and diplomatic documents including the famous video "Collateral Murder" that showed the killing of 18 civilians by US military personnel on Baghdad Street in 2007. Like Snowden and Wyle, Manning also was personally involved in the practices she exposed: she was born as Bradley and she was a soldier. Although this video caused a stir as can be seen in Isabella Pezzini's analysis (2014), as always, the semantic significance of the whistleblower's story and her legislative misfortunes prevailed over that of the leaked documents, as confirmed by the documentary *XY Chelsea* (Travers Hawkins, 2019) and the numerous investigations into the case.

In order to highlight the differences in contemporary journalistic storytelling in comparison to previous forms in the past, a mediologic explanation might be useful.

From the nineteenth century onwards, one of the major attractions of the journalistic genre has been the revelation of the shocking and the provocation of a state of agnosticism in the reader, as testified by various famous cases of muckrakers or texts like Pulitzer's *On Journalism*. With the emergence of twentieth-century mediums such as cinema, this task proved to be better suited to audiovisual mediums, so that first television and then the Internet have been able to take up the critical legacy of early journalism and, with it, the narrative and transversal trajectories of social groups. However, cinema, as media and medium, has always possessed certain features that ultimately denote the aesthetic manipulation of the narrative, such as the focus on character. The predisposition to narrate through images the life of one or more subjects is certainly a key element in the mythographic construction of cultural icons.

In this view, is it possible to try to understand what happens to stories and the meanings they convey when, in being conveyed, they transform their languages? The answer, which is certainly affirmative, can be confirmed by various studies on transmedia storytelling. The genre of scandal, and specifically of data gate or data leak, can be said to belong to the same thematic area as that of digital conspiracies.

Now, it is possible to assume that, in the digital age, the narrative schemes that shape the facts being told appear increasingly "object-oriented": where the scoops of the twentieth century concerned scandalous subjects, laid bare in their corruptibility and selfishness, from Anonymous onwards, and with the recent popularisation and mytho-

logisation of the figure of the whistleblower, it is the object of value (dysphoric) that appears as “shocking”, which in turn denotes a socio-semiotic scenario oriented towards the object and the non-human (i.e., the information). In this case, to speak of the socio-semiotic scenario is also to speak of the set of socio-cultural groups inhabiting a purely urban environment. On the other hand, it is perhaps precisely cinema that is a person-oriented medium, as we have said, ultimately offering interpretative paths of a dramatic nature which, from a semiotic point of view, have the function of orienting the user within the information overload.

Narratological oppositions in whistleblowers' information delivery

Based on the previous ideas, we are on the one hand dealing with a legal context and a *legal practice* of whistleblowing, within which the whistleblower is an extremely functional figure from the perspective of a “bottom-up” policy and can be positively sanctioned by the community. On the other hand, we are also confronted with the context of public and journalistic communication, as well as the *performative gesture* of the whistleblower which is configured as subversive.

In both cases, we can speak of performativity, but it is clear that it is in the second case that this expression allows us to denote more clearly cultural and ideological connotations.

To better clarify this aspect, it is useful to think of the person-non-person opposition, which symmetrically reflects the *named-anonymous* opposition.

According to Thüsing & Forst, the anonymity of whistleblowers is anything but a legislatively resolved issue:

anonymous whistleblowing is considered by some to offer particularly strong protection for whistle-blowers while others perceive it as an invitation to denunciators. Critics also point out that the protection of whistleblowers by anonymity is far from perfect as their identity could be revealed by the facts they disclose, which may be known to one person or very few people only. If the identity of the whistleblower is revealed, he also cannot be protected against retaliation properly, as he cannot prove that it was actually him who blew the whistle and that he is facing detriment in retaliation for the disclosure he made (Thüsing & Forst, 2016, p. 17).

The anonymity that characterises the emerging laws on whistleblowing is semiotically opposed to the personality that characterises the first-person narratives of the mythical whistleblowers. Indeed, while legal practice generally provides for the anonymity of the whistleblower, as do the emerging whistleblowing laws, the mythological whistleblowers' *performative gesture* highlights the person and their personality, making them the subject of myths and sometimes of cults, both in Western and developing cultures.

These oppositions are not just differences in expression: anonymity is not just an encrypted name, just as the person does not correspond to the signature on a complaint. According to Sparling, “transparency can sometimes derive from a degree of secrecy [...] the vote serves as a means of illuminating the true opinion of the populace precisely because it renders invisible the particular votes of individuals. Secret accusations promise to render one thing visible by veiling another” (Sparling, 2021, p. 414).

This first distinction allows for the highlighting of the legislative practice on the one

hand and the performative gesture of the whistleblower as an information-delivering activist on the other.

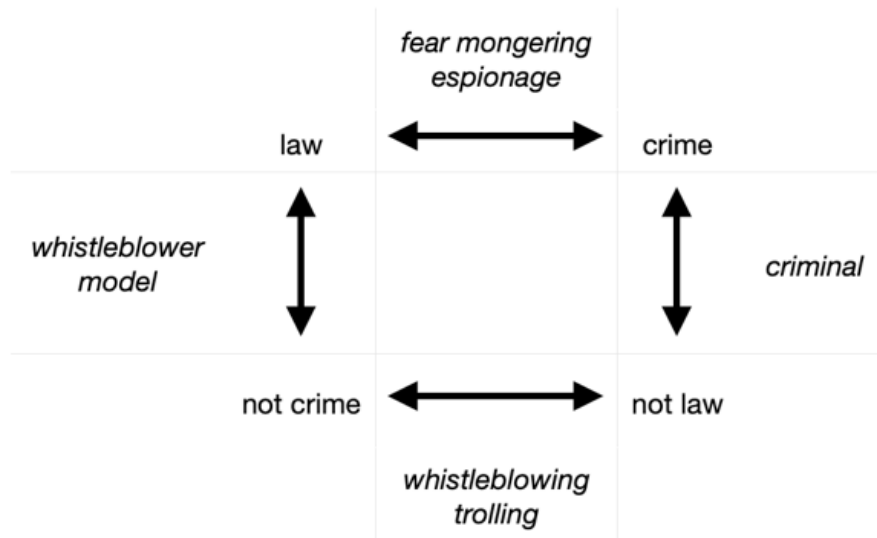


Figure 2. The semiotic square of information delivering in lawfulness.

While the whistleblower “model” which is provided by the legal code can be located on the left of the square, between the *law* and its implicit counterpart *not-crime*, the *mythological whistleblower* understood as an information activist will be located in the *not-crime/not-law* opposition. In fact, while the whistleblower model is a narrative role provided for by the legal code, the whistleblower as an information-delivering actant acts in favour of people in an *idealistic* way. The latter embraces its role, which in several cases does not match the legislative one. Moreover, as illicit facts revealed by mythological whistleblowers are aimed at blaming some kind of institutional actor – that consequently will deny, at least initially, the factuality and truthfulness of these allegations – the resulting communicative effect for the public is the meaninglessness I described before. In such a view, the whistleblower as an information-delivering activist is assimilable to the troll. Leone (2020) defined the practice of trolling as meaningless, as it denotes a process involving the “disruption of the mechanisms of virtual public conversation” in which “the correspondence between signified thought and signifying word is less important than the fun that one proves at witnessing the jamming of social conversation” and “it disrupts the framework of reasonable conversation to loudly protest against the lack of significance in everyday digital existence”. The meaninglessness that characterizes trolling is not far from our current analysis. Indeed, the rhetorical elements that describe trolling, such as provocation, critical public discourse and lies are the same as those that define the whistleblowing discourse. The troll functions as an “observer actant”, as does the whistleblower within the narrative scheme of investigative journalism. Moreover, when we consider the whistleblower as an information-delivering activist, we have to refer to scandals in digital culture related to public figures responsible for data leaks and data breaches so that the focus of media discourse will be indeed not just on the person, but also on a particular object of value, the database. This object of value is no less indictable than other forms of occult objects of conspiracy narratives that characterised cyberpunk and postmodern literature oriented towards critical speculation on technological and technocratic progress, which have always shared their audience with the producers of science fiction narratives populated by aliens, non-humans and post-humans.

If we assume the dialectical rhetoric of mythological whistleblowers as a defining one, so we can infer a further positional role within the *law/crime* opposition. On this axis it is possible to locate the practices which, like whistleblowing and trolling, aim to discover or unveil something which is kept in secrecy; however, differently from them, such practices are implemented by collective actors such as governments and institutions.

For instance, both the *fear-mongering* practice – the perlocutionary act, often part of a scaremongering strategy, aimed at raising critical awareness on the object of discourse as shown, for example, in some teasers of ethical advertising – and *espionage* share the tendency to take the form of or to refer to some conspiracy narrative schema, in trying to mediate the uncovering of a secret through non-conventional channels and outside of the official contexts. According to Glassner (2004), fear-mongering deploys narrative techniques to normalise what are actually errors in reasoning. Such a task is often accomplished through repetition, depiction of isolated incidents as trends and misdirection, that is, the ability to hide one trend by stressing another. Fear mongering is persuasive discourse like Lyndon Johnson's "Daisy" (1964), which made the element of fear in election advertising an imperative, as well as those discourses adopted by the media in the Covid-19 crisis (Ravenelle et al., 2021).

On the contrary, the spy has been described in 2003 by Stjernfelt in the frame of Barry Smith's "fallibilistic apriorism":

A spy investigates some subject secretly because of a certain danger or illegality in the investigation which, in turn, is determined by the fact that its subject is the business of some competing power, political or private, domestic or foreign. There is thus an a priori connection between the secrecy of the information and the relative illegality in which the spy indulges. The parenthesis of the dictionary definition implies that the spy typically has been sent out as an instrument to gather information by one power, militarily competing with another power possessing the secrets (Stjernfelt, 2003, p. 137).

Although fear-mongering and espionage differ in several respects – the former can be configured as a public practice whereas the latter is, by definition, a secret one – both are united by a certain *logic of saying*, insofar as in both practices the linguistic act is inscribed within a broader socio-semiotic strategy aimed at obtaining a communicative gain, which is retrieved precisely from the meaning of what has been said. Whistleblowing and trolling are rather defined by a *logic of doing*.

The purpose of this first opposition is to clarify the distinction between the practices of delivery of information related to the manipulation of languages, in terms of the sphere of doing and, at the same time, practices related to the communication of the content/meaning of said information, regarding the sphere of saying.

In this view, the attitudinal opposition coincides with a *pragmatic* and *narratological* opposition, through which it is possible to contrast the gestures of the whistleblower according to their capacity to take the form of saying (in the first case, in compliance with legislative norms) or doing (in the second case, in contrast with such norms).

At this point, it is possible to investigate the *symbolic value* of these narrative roles through the use of a second semiotic square that opposes the semantic category of the *locutory saying* to that of the *pragmatic doing*.

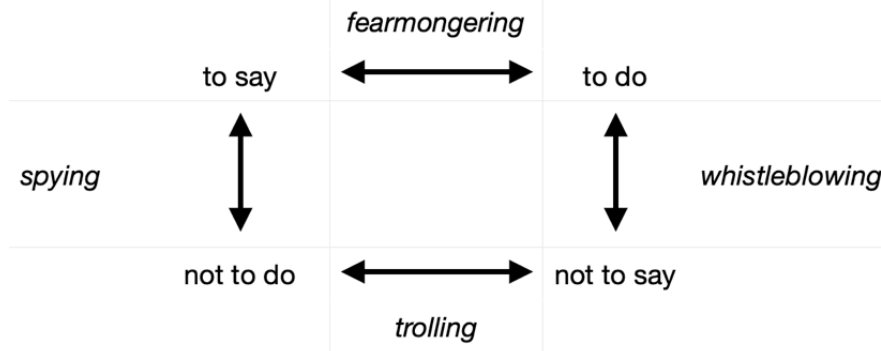


Figure 3. The semiotic square of information-delivering actants

Where the fundamental opposition *to say/to do* describes the practice of fear-mongering, if we understand it in the terms set out above, trolling fits into the opposition *not-to-do/not-to-say*: trolling is not only meaningless because, according to Leone (2020), it does not convey meaning and destroys the dynamics of conversation, but it is also “inconclusive” because its practice cannot be deciphered as endowed with meaning from a pragmatic standpoint. On the other hand, the opposition *to-say/not-to-do* denotes the practice of spying – insofar as the spy always has to reveal something without being discovered, i.e., without exhibiting their own doing – while the opposition *to-do/not-to-say* instead denotes the practice of mythological whistleblowing, insofar as the meaning of doing emerges over that of saying, which is more strictly linguistic.

Moreover, if trolling and mythological whistleblowing can be united starting from a *centripetal tension*, which leads the recipient to focus attention on the person – both in the case of the mythological whistleblower and in trolling it is the rhetorical style of the person that represents the focus of the discourse – fear-mongering and espionage can be said to share instead a *centrifugal tension*, which involves the manipulation and re-injection of information within an encyclopaedic space, the meta-place of shared knowledge.

Conclusions

Returning to the juxtaposition between the whistleblower “model” and the mythological whistleblower, it is possible to argue that both actants can be understood as “truth-tellers”.

The discursive construction of truth is not new either to semiotics or to the philosophy of science. This aspect allows us to link the discourse to the general theme of information delivery. When talking about whistleblowing, one immediately thinks of journalistic discourses, such as those that accompanied Snowden’s revelations, the publication of Wikileaks’ leaked documents, and Aaron Swartz’s copyrighted documents. All these forms of symbolic practice are characterised by a subversive nature. But the discourses of information delivery are not only of a subversive nature. For instance, the data visualisation image – which can be found in scientific, artistic or journalistic discourses, to name the most common – is certainly the result of an information-delivering practice aimed at explaining a phenomenon or visualising a multitude of entities within a synoptic framework. What all these forms of information-delivering practice share, both in whistleblowing and in data visualization, therefore, is the strategic constructivism of



referents and discourses, which ultimately explains the great success of data science and data analysis practices in our societies.

Besides, according to the ideas exposed before, the truthfulness of information delivered in the digital age appears to be a mere attribute of the delivered content, in respect of the cultural value of the gestural practice performed by the enunciators of such content. In this view, it is not the truth that is the focal point of whistleblowers' discourses, but rather the sense of reliability that emerges from these discourses, which are often collective ones, enunciated by both whistleblowers and cultural institutions such as newspapers. Because of this, assuming the era of post-truth and fake news as a starting point, whistleblowers' discourses seem to bear the focus of semiotic analysis not so much on the linguistic but rather on the discursive and pragmatic construction of truth.

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