Proposal for JOURNALISM & SOCIETY: “Leaks & Whistleblowers”
(to be taught at global program NYU BUENOS AIRES)

Instructor: Santiago O’Donnell (so48@nyu.edu)

Course Description

In 2010, WikiLeaks, a non-profit organization that publishes submissions from anonymous whistleblowers, in a partnership with some of the most important news publications, began releasing thousands of classified diplomatic cables sent between the U.S. State Department and consulates and embassies around the world. Three years later, former National Security Agency subcontractor Edward Snowden leaked top secret information about surveillance activities by the NSA. More recently, the Panama Papers became the biggest data leak in the history of journalism: over 11 million documents containing financial information about offshore entities were revealed.

These events signal the beginning of the big leak era, which this course will focus on. We will analyze the role of media concentration and technological innovation as twin driving forces in the inception of this big leak era over recent years. We will study the consequences of these changes at three different levels: (i) the legal consequences for whistleblowers; (ii) the resulting birth of global networks and partnerships that expose technical, cultural and economic limitations in the traditional media; and (iii) the geopolitical implications, as a breach in one government’s security apparatus is a victory for that government’s opponents. Finally, we will confront one larger question: whether the big leak era means that transparency will (could?) replace fairness as journalism’s main paradigm.

Course Objectives

Utilizing the big leak phenomena, the course will attempt to develop students’ academic and journalistic skills, such as analytical reading, investigation and research, journalistic writing, communication, debate, and presentation techniques, all of which are key for students in the fields of journalism and media & communication. To accomplish these goals, students are expected to attend all sessions, complete all the reading and assignments and actively participate in discussion in every class.

Grading

There will be a midterm (1500 words) and a final paper (2000 words) that will involve case studies that emerge from class readings and discussion. Each student will pick a leak and analyze its different dimensions (size, quality, orientation, outcome). The midterm paper will provide a first approach to the phenomena, whereas the final paper will demand a cultural, economic and sociopolitical background so as to conclude how that particular leak
calls into question embedded notions, rules and practices of traditional journalism, or how it sets forward new ones for the future.

Assessment components:

- Attendance and participation: 20%
- Midterm paper: 40%
- Final paper: 40%

**Reading**

https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/mar/16/whistleblowers-double-standard-obama-david-petraeus-chelsea-manning


https://panamapapers.icij.org/20160403-panama-papers-global-overview.html

https://www.opendemocracy.net/democraciaabierta/santiago-odonnell/christmas-with-assange


**Film:**

The Fifth Estate (Assange)

Citizenfour (Snowden)

**Books:**

The Wikileaks files: the word according to U.S. Empire. (compilation)

Cryptopunks: Freedom and the future of the internet. By Julian Assange and Jacob Appelbaum

No Place to Hide: Snowden, the NSA and the U.S. Surveillance State. By Glenn Greenwald

Panama Papers: Breaking the Story of how the Rich and powerful hide their money. By Bastian Obermayer and Frederik Obermaier