 Journalism & Society: Leaks and Whistleblowers

Class code

JOUR-UA 9503  
MCC-UE 9111

Instructor Details

Santiago O’Donnell  
so48@nyu.edu  
155-577-3423

Class Details

Location: Piazzola classroom, Anchorena 1314, Buenos Aires.

Prerequisites

None.

Class Description

In 2010, WikiLeaks, a non-profit organization that publishes submissions from anonymous whistleblowers, in 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 for traditional media; and (iii) the geopolitical implications, as a breach in a 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 could replace fairness as journalism’s main paradigm.

Desired Outcomes

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.

There will be a midterm (2000 words) and a final paper (3000 words) that will involve case studies which 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 phenomenon, 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. In order to ensure meaningful participation of students in class, they will be required to submit weekly one-page responses to the assigned readings.

Assessment components:
● Attendance and participation: 10%
● Weekly assignments: 15%
● Midterm paper: 25%
● Final paper: 50%
Failure to submit or fulfill any required course component results in failure of the class.

Assessment Expectations

Grade A: The student makes excellent use of empirical and theoretical material and offers well structured arguments in his/her work. The student writes comprehensive essays / exam questions and his/her work shows strong evidence of critical thought and extensive reading.

Grade B: The candidate shows a good understanding of the problem and has demonstrated the ability to formulate and execute a coherent research strategy.

Grade C: Work is acceptable and shows a basic grasp of the research problem. However, the work fails to organize findings coherently and is in need of improvement.

Grade D: The work passes because some relevant points are made. However, there may be a problem of poor definition, lack of critical awareness, poor research.

Grade F: The work shows that the research problem is not understood; there is little or no critical awareness and the research is clearly negligible.
### Grade conversion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Score Range</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Score Range</th>
<th>Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>100-93</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>76-73</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>92-90</td>
<td>A-</td>
<td>72-70</td>
<td>C-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>89-87</td>
<td>B+</td>
<td>69-67</td>
<td>D+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86-83</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>66-60</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>82-80</td>
<td>B-</td>
<td>59-0</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>79-77</td>
<td>C+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Exams and Submission of work

Final Exam dates cannot be changed under any circumstance.

Mid term exam dates will be scheduled with each professor and it must be before the break.

Unexcused absences from exams are not permitted and will result in failure of the exam. If you are granted an excused absence from examination (with authorization, as above), your lecturer will decide how you will make-up the assessment component, if at all (by make-up examination, extra coursework, or an increased weighting on an alternate assessment component, etc.).

Written work due in class must be submitted during the class time to the professor.

**Final essays must be submitted to the professor in print and electronic copy.** If the student is not in Buenos Aires, he/she must send a printed copy via express postal mail (i.e. FeDEX, DHL, UPS, etc) to the NYU Center in Buenos Aires – Anchorena 1314 - (C1425ELF) Argentina. This copy must arrive before or on the date of established deadline.

### Attendance Policy

- NYU’s Global Programs (including NYU Buenos Aires) must adhere to a strict policy regarding course attendance. **No unexcused absences are permitted.**
- Each unexcused absence will be penalized by deducting 1% from the student’s final course grade.
- Absences are only excused if they are due to illness, religious observance or emergencies.
- Absences due to illness or mental health issues must be discussed with the Assistant Director for Academics Programs, Moira Pérez, **within one week** of your return to class.
- A doctor’s note excusing your absence is mandatory.
- **The date on the doctor’s note must be the date of the missed class or exam**
- Being absent to any kind of examination must be informed at or before the time of said examination via email to the Assistant Director for Academic Programs, Moira Pérez (moira.perez@nyu.edu).
- Requests to be excused for non-illness purposes must be discussed with your professors prior to the date(s) in question. (If you want the reasons of your absence to be treated confidentially and not shared with your professor, please contact the Assistant Director for Academics Programs,
Moira Pérez, at moira.perez@nyu.edu.

- If students have more than four unexcused absences, they will fail the course.
- Each class lasts one hour and half or two hours. **Missing one class represents one absence. For those courses that meet once a week (three-hour block), missing one class represents two absences.**
- Students are responsible for making up any work missed due to absence.
- NYU BA also expects students to arrive to class promptly (both at the beginning and after any breaks) and to remain for the duration of the class. Three late arrivals or early departures (10 minutes after the starting time or before the ending time) will be considered one absence. Missing more than 20 minutes of a class will count as a full absence.
- Please note that for classes involving a **field trip or other external visit**, transportation difficulties are never grounds for an excused absence. It is the student’s responsibility to arrive at an agreed meeting point in a punctual and timely fashion.
- Make-up classes for Holidays are mandatory as regular scheduled classes.
- Students observing a religious holiday during regularly scheduled class time are entitled to miss class without any penalty to their grade. This is for the holiday only and does not include the days of travel that may come before and/or after the holiday. Students must notify their professor and the Office of Academic Support in writing via email one week in advance before being absent for this purpose.

### Academic Accommodations

Academic accommodations are available for students with documented disabilities. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at 212-998-4980 or see their website ([http://www.nyu.edu/life/safety-health-andwellness/students-with-disabilities.html](http://www.nyu.edu/life/safety-health-andwellness/students-with-disabilities.html)) for further information. Students with disabilities who believe that they may need accommodations in a class are encouraged to contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities at (212) 998-4980 as soon as possible to better ensure that such accommodations are implemented in a timely fashion. For more information, see **Study Away and Disability**.

### Late Submission of Work

Late work should be emailed to the professor or submitted **in person** to the Assistant Director for Academics Programs **during office hours** (Mon – Fri, 9.30 am to 5 pm), who will write on the essay or other work the date and time of submission, in the presence of the student. Another member of the administrative staff can accept the work, in person, in the absence of the Assistant Director for Academics Programs and will write the date and time of submission on the work, as above.

Work submitted within 5 weekdays after the submission time without an agreed extension receives a penalty of 10 points on the 100 point scale.

Written work submitted after 5 weekdays after the submission date without an agreed extension fails and is given a zero.

**Please note** end of semester essays must be submitted on time.

### Plagiarism Policy

**Academic Integrity**

Academic Integrity is intimately related to the teaching and learning process. When writing research papers, you need to keep in mind that plagiarism includes...
the use of another person’s words, ideas, judgment, images or data as though they were your own, whether intentionally or unintentionally. It also includes presenting and/or paraphrasing discourse or ideas from a published work (in print or on internet) without quotation marks and clear without acknowledgment of the original source.

For formatting in your papers, refer to MLA guidelines. On matters regarding academic integrity, refer to the section “Academic Standards and Discipline” in the College of Arts and Science Bulletin http://bulletin.cas.nyu.edu/page/academic.policies#STANDARDS and to “Statement on Academic Integrity” in NYU Expository Writing Program: Policies and Procedures: http://www.nyu.edu/cas/ewp/html/policies__procedures.html#statementacademicintegrity

All your written work must be submitted as a hard copy AND in electronic form to the instructor.

It is expected that the student follow the rules on academic honesty and intellectual integrity established by NYU University.

Required Text(s)

Articles:
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/santiajodonnell/christmas-with-assange
https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/08/21/julian-assange-a-man-without-a-country
https://panamapapers.icij.org/20161201-global-impact.html
http://time.com/3910054/fifa-scandal-sepp-blatter/

Books:
(available in NYU-BA library)
The Wikileaks Files: the Word According to U.S. Empire (compilation; Verso - Reprint edition, 2016)
Julian Assange: Unauthorized biography (Cannongate Books, 2011)
Supplemental Material(s)

Film: The Fifth Estate (Assange). Official trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZT1wb8_tcYU
Citizenfour. Official trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ArpUtSFJ950

Week 1
[Aug. 29-31]

Introduction
1. Overview of the course. Shared expectations
2. Hackers, leakers and spinners, the leak, the plant and the anonymous source. Who does it and why. The thin line between being a traitor and a terrorist like Chelsea Manning, or being a valued and admired informant like Deep Throat.

Readings:


Assignment: submit a one-page response to the assigned readings

Week 2
[Sept. 5-7]

Tuesday: reading assignment due

A brief history of leaks and whistleblowers
1. Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers.
2. The 9-11 effect. Obama’s use of the Treason act against seven informants for leaking to the press. Brief history of the seven whistleblowers indicted for under the Obama administration.

Readings:

“Obama used the Espionage Act to put a record number of reporters' sources in jail, and Trump could be even worse” by Peter Sterne, *Freedom of the Press Foundation*, June 21, 2017.


Assignment: submit a one-page response to the assigned readings

---

**Week 3**

Tuesday: reading assignment due

[Sept. 12-14]

2. Cablegate. The blow to US diplomacy. What the cables show. The thin line that separates diplomacy and lobby from espionage and foreign intervention

*Readings from:*

“Wikileaks” by David Leigh and Luke Harding, chapters 13,14 and 18
“Julian Assange: unauthorized biography” chapters 12 and 13

Assignment: submit a one-page response to the assigned readings

---

**Week 4**

Tuesday: reading assignment due

[Sept. 19-21]

WikiLeaks II


*Readings from:*

https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/08/21/julian-assange-a-man-without-a-country

The Wikileaks Files: the Word According to U.S. Empire (compilation; Verso - Reprint edition, 2016) Chapter 4: Indexing the Empire).

Assignment: submit a one-page response to the assigned readings

**Week 5**

Tuesday: reading assignment due

[Sept.26-28]

Wikileaks III
1. The unraveling of unholy alliance with The Guardian and the mainstream media.
   Consequences for Wikileaks and for the mainstream media.
2. The theory behind Wikileaks: The egalitarian effect of transparency versus the power that derives from opacity. The flow of information in the Western World. The Pentagon and Silicon Valley. Strengths and weaknesses in Assange´s arguments.
   Reading: Cypherpunks: Freedom and the Future of the Internet. By Julian Assange and Jacob Appelbaum

Assignment: submit a one-page response to the assigned reading

**Week 6**

Tuesday: reading assignment due

[Oct.3-5]

Snowden
2. What Snowden leaked and did not leak. Why he says he did it. The intelligence community´s take on what he did and why he did it. The ACLU´s defense.
   Consequences for the NSC and for Snowden.
   Reading from: No Place to Hide: Snowden, the NSA and the U.S. Surveillance State. By Glenn Greenwald (chapter 3 : Picking it all up)
   Assignment: submit the Midterm Paper (2000 words; 25% of the final grade)

SEMESTER BREAK. No class on oct. 10-12

**Week 7**

[Oct. 17-19]

Mass surveillance
2. The cyber wars with Rusia, China and Iran. Encryption as a weapon of war and a tool for journalism
Assignment: submit a one-page response to the assigned readings

**Week 8**

Tuesday: reading assignment due

[Oct. 24-26]

Panama Papers I
1. Background: The war against fiscal havens. Luxleaks and Swissleaks. The ICIJ. The role of non profits in big leaks.

Reading from: 
Panama Papers: Breaking the Story of how the Rich and Powerful Hide Their Money. By Bastian Overmayer and Frederik Overmaier (Prologue, chapters 1,2).

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

Assignment: submit a one-page response to the assigned readings.

**Week 9**

Tuesday: reading assignment due

[Oct. 31-Nov2]

Panama Papers II
1. The geopolitical impact. Winners (U.S.) and losers (Russia and China). Media coverage of the Panama Papers. Case study: Argentina.
2. Economic and legal impact. Impact on tax havens in general and on Panama in particular. The arrest of Mossak and Fonseca.

Reading from: 
Panama Papers: Breaking the Story of how the Rich and Powerful Hide Their Money. By Bastian Overmayer and Frederik Overmaier (annex, postscriptum)

"Panama Papers Have Had Historic Global Effects — and the Impacts Keep Coming” by Will Fitzgibbon and Emilia Díaz-Struck, ICIJ, December 1, 2016)
https://panamapapers.icij.org/20161201-global-impact.html

Assignment: submit a one-page response to the assigned readings

**Week 10**

Tuesday: reading assignment due

[Nov.7-9]

Big leaks and little leakers: Vaticanleaks and FIFAgate, WilldLeaks, DCLeaks, Balcanleaks, Mexicoleaks
Readings:

“Sex and blackmail allegations at heart of Vatican leaks scandal” by PeterPopham, The Independent, December 5, 2015
Assignment: submit a one-page response to the assigned readings

Week 11

Tuesday: reading assignment due

[Nov.14-16]

Week 11: Leaks and globalization
1. The WikiLeaks network, the Snowden Network and the ICIJ Network.
2. From the “lone wolf” investigative reporter model to the collaborative model. The role and motivations of big leak funders: George Soros and Pierre Omidyar. Big leaks and civil society.
Readings from:
Panama Papers: Breaking the Story of how the Rich and Powerful Hide Their Money.  By Frederik Overmaier and Bastian Overmayer (chapter 6).

Assignment: submit a one-page response to the assigned readings

Week 12

Tuesday: reading assignment due

[Nov. 21-23]

Week 12: Big leaks and the future of journalism.
1. How the balance of forces between journalist and source/subject/interviewee has been altered by the emergence of internet and social media. How the cultural battle between Trump and the mainstream media is being fought all over the world. Case Study: Rupert Murdoch and the “bad leaks” that forced him to shut down the Daily Mirror in the U.K.
2. How big leaks expose the limits of local journalism by unveiling its biases and conflicts of interest. How technology and concentration is by making journalism more localized, more specialized and more fragmented.
Readings from:
Julian Assange: Unauthorized biography. (chapters 13, 14 and epilogue).

Assignment: submit a one-page response to the assigned readings

Week 13

Tuesday: reading assignment due

[Nov. 28-30]

Week 13: Preliminary conclusions.
1. As big leaks of highly secret documents become commonplace, and recipients of this information are no longer passive readers, are they more inclined to go directly to the primary source and bypass the mediation of journalists? As big corporations
take over what used to be a family business to make them media empires or multipurpose conglomerates, do the journalists employed by these empires and conglomerates have the same freedom as they did in the 70s and 80s?
2. How do big leaks expose these weaknesses in the old model and usher us into a new era of zero or close to zero privacy, corporate public communication disguised as old fashioned journalism?
As journalists become celebrities and celebrities become journalists, as bloggers and social media unveil journalism’s dirty little secrets, as journalism becomes more global and yet more focalized and segmented, has transparency replaced fairness as the profession’s main paradigm?
Readings specific to final paper project. Check with instructor

Week 14

Tuesday: reading assignment due

[Dec.5-7]
Week 14: Final paper workshop.
1. Class presentations and final course evaluations by students and instructor.
2. One-on-one coaching before final paper due.

Readings specific to final paper project. Check with instructor

Week 15

[Dec.14]
Dec. 14 Final Paper due (3000 words; 50% of the grade).

Classroom Etiquette
The use of Blackberrys, phones and IPods in class are forbidden

Required Co-curricular Activities

Suggested Co-curricular Activities

Your Instructor

Santiago O’Donnell is the Foreign Editor at the argentine newspaper Página/12 and a former Los Angeles Times and Washington Post staff writer. Besides teaching a journalism course at NYU-Buenos Aires for the last two years, he directs of the Journalism Masters Program at Universidad de Buenos Aires since 2013. He has written four books, including two based on cablegate: the best sellers Argenleaks (Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 2011) and Politileaks (Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 2014) and a third based on the Panama Papers: Argenpapers (Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, due October 2017).