

TIMELINE



A History of Whistleblowers and
Document Leaks

TIMELINE: A HISTORY OF WHISTLEBLOWERS AND DOCUMENT LEAKS

By Jamie Ruchser

The dissemination of classified and sometimes sensitive information to the public often sparks debate about freedom of information—for example, what information should be shared and what should be withheld? The rapid rise of the internet in the early twenty-first century has provided the public with access to documents leaked through whistleblowing. This timeline aims to identify key whistleblowers and document leaks in recent history.

June 13, 1971: *The New York Times* (NYT) published the Pentagon Papers. Researcher Daniel Ellsberg had leaked these documents to the NYT, which detailed how the former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara lied to the American public about the Vietnam War. McNamara had secretly commissioned a report on the history of the Vietnam War, known as the Pentagon Papers, and admitted within these documents that American troops in Vietnam were not making progress against the Vietnamese communist force, despite public pronouncements of the opposite. The documents also contained historical information about the original decision by former U.S. President Harry Truman

to support French rulers in Vietnam and opinions from the American intelligence community that there was no Russian plot to take over Vietnam.

June 17, 1972: Burglars broke into the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate Hotel in Washington, DC. *Washington Post* journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein subsequently began investigating the incident and learned that the burglars were employed by the Committee to Reelect the President, which was organized to assist the Nixon administration with efforts to win the 1972 presidential election. They uncovered evidence of illegal political espionage carried out by the White House and the Committee to Reelect the President, including the presence of a secret fund kept for financing political spies hired by the committee. Woodward and Bernstein were tipped about the scandal and were provided with valuable information by a whistleblower, known to the public at the time simply as “Deep Throat.” These leaks were published in a series of articles in the *Post*. Years after the event, former FBI agent Mark Felt identified himself as this key source.



November 13, 1974: Whistleblower Karen Silkwood died in a car accident after emphasizing the need for nuclear power plant safety at the Kerr-McGee plutonium fuels production plant in Crescent, Oklahoma. Some journalists have said that Silkwood died under suspicious circumstances, but speculations about foul play have not been confirmed.

February 4, 1996: The former director of research for U.S. tobacco company Brown & Williamson, Jeffrey Wigand, exposed the tobacco industry in a *60 Minutes* interview. Wigand revealed that Brown & Williamson executives lied to Congress about the addictiveness of their cigarettes, specifically that they were aware that their company chemically altered nicotine to make cigarettes more addictive.

January 18, 2002: *TIME* named whistleblower Sherron Watkins the Person of the Week for exposing Enron, an American energy and commodities company, as a corrupt corporation running a fraudulent financial

accounting system, similar to a Ponzi scheme. Watkins had previously worked as Enron's vice president of corporate development.

July 23, 2002: The Downing Street Memo was a leaked record of sensitive discussions within the British government by former U.K. Prime Minister Tony Blair about the 2003 Iraq invasion. Within the memo, it is suggested that former U.S. President

△ A supporter holds a poster of Julian Assange during a protest against the extradition of the WikiLeaks' founder and whistleblower, in Athens, Greece, June 20, 2022. *Alkis Konstantinidis/Reuters*

George W. Bush explained to Blair that the U.S. military would attempt to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein and that the United States would craft the intelligence to support this move. Blair subsequently supported the 2003 invasion and war efforts even though the memo highlights the acknowledgement that the Bush administration used false pretenses to justify the invasion.

2003: Lawrence A. Franklin, who previously worked as an official for the Pentagon, passed classified information about Iran to employees of the pro-Israel lobby the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), who then passed this information on to Israeli diplomats. The information pertained to a presidential national security directive about U.S. policies against Iran. Franklin's actions initiated a conversation within the international community about allies spying on allies.

January 2004: Army specialist Joe Darby turned in photographs to U.S. Army investigators that showed the torture of Iraqi prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Subsequently, American news media published the photos, which sparked outrage and discussion around these human rights abuses.

November 30, 2004: In June of 2004, a Red Cross inspection team investigated the American military prison at Guantánamo Bay in Cuba and found evidence of torture and human rights violations. While the Red Cross initially distributed the report to U.S. government entities, the *NYT* was able to obtain a leaked memo about the report and exposed these findings in a November 2004 article.

2006: Julian Assange founded the website WikiLeaks, an online library of leaked documents that currently holds over ten million restricted official documents and other material involving war, spying, and corruption, mostly connected to the United States.

February 3, 2010: Chelsea Manning leaked classified information to WikiLeaks via a secure file-transfer while stationed as an intelligence analyst in Iraq. Manning provided WikiLeaks with approximately 250,000 American diplomatic cables and 480,000 Army field reports from the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. According to the *NYT*, Manning's disclosure of declassified documents ushered in the "age of leaks."

April 5, 2010: WikiLeaks leaked a classified 2007 U.S. military video of U.S. soldiers killing Iraqi civilians indiscriminately near New Baghdad from an Apache helicopter. In an additional leak on October 22, WikiLeaks released more files that contained accounts of U.S. Army soldiers and their experiences on the ground in the Iraq War.

January 23, 2011: Al Jazeera obtained documents about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, known as the Palestine Papers, and released this information to the public. The documents are dated from 1999 to 2010 and disclosed confidential records of meetings between Israeli, Palestinian, and U.S. leaders. These papers also contained details from 2007 meetings where negotiations eventually failed after Israeli leaders refused to freeze settlement activity in the West Bank.

April 25, 2011: Seven years after the initial Guantánamo Bay leak, WikiLeaks released documents detailing the cases of prisoners detained at the U.S. military base at Guantánamo Bay.

July 15, 2011: Former National Security Agency (NSA) executive Thomas Drake was sentenced to one year of probation and 240 hours of community service for leaking to the press information about mismanagement, fraud, and abuse at the NSA. One of his concerns was that the NSA's Trailblazer program violated the privacy rights of U.S. citizens.

July 5, 2012: WikiLeaks released searchable email files from Syrian leaders, ministries, and companies, exposing communications between the government of Bashar Al-Assad and other Syrian government leaders. The leaks exposed the inner workings and interests of the government in the period between 2008 and 2012.

June 11, 2013: *The Guardian* revealed the identity of whistleblower and document leaker Edward Snowden. Snowden worked as a government contractor for the NSA and exposed the U.S. government's mass surveillance program via a document leak. He explained, "I have no intention of hiding who I am because I know I have done nothing wrong."

June 19, 2015: Global corruption by Saudi Arabian leaders was revealed when WikiLeaks released an archive of searchable diplomatic cables from the Saudi Foreign Ministry and Saudi embassies around the world. This leak contained information about how the

Kingdom manages relationships with other countries "through bribing and co-opting key individuals and institutions". The cables also demonstrated the bureaucratic structure of the Saudi government and how top leadership will typically provide input for small or mundane government decisions.

September 24, 2015: Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha held a press conference where she sounded the alarm on unusually high levels of lead in the blood levels of children in Flint, Michigan. She published her findings, but they were initially dismissed by the Michigan government. Dr. Hanna-Attisha's whistleblowing efforts assisted in exposing the unsafe levels of lead in Flint's drinking water.

November 16, 2015: In recorded tapes and transcripts, WikiLeaks revealed that U.S. nonprofit SourceAmerica was embroiled in a corruption scandal with the U.S. government regarding employment funding for people with disabilities.

February 5, 2016: WikiLeaks published documents revealing how Western and Chinese companies had been conducting a financial war to obtain mining rights in the Central African Republic. In 2020, Amnesty International reported environmental damage and human rights abuses related to this.

February 23, 2016: WikiLeaks revealed that the NSA had intercepted communications between world leaders, including at the United Nations and European Union. Specifically, the NSA bugged a climate change strategy meeting between former UN Secretary General Ban Ki-

Moon and former German Chancellor Angela Merkel. WikiLeaks editor Julian Assange commented that the bugging of the meeting by the NSA reflects how U.S. leadership is protecting “big oil” interests of the fossil fuel industry.

April 3, 2016: The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, along with over a hundred newspapers, released their first major data leak known as the Panama Papers, which contained details about the offshore accounts of world leaders. The documents showed that major banking entities assisted in the clandestine concealment of hard-to-trace assets in locations such as the British Virgin Islands and Panama.

July 19, 2016: WikiLeaks revealed communications of Turkey’s Justice and Development Party, which is still the country’s ruling political party. The leak exposed how Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s son-in-law was a shareholder in the oil trading company Powertrans.

July 22, 2016: WikiLeaks released documents from the U.S. Democratic National Committee. This was a part of a WikiLeaks series relating to former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. The leak contained emails from Clinton’s private email server, spanning the period from 2010 to 2014. Clinton explained that she set up a private email so she would not need to carry around two mobile devices, one for a government email and another for personal emails. Some of the emails included excerpts from Clinton’s paid speeches to Wall Street investors and donations to Clinton from foreign governments, known as “Clinton Cash.”

November 28, 2016: WikiLeaks published a library of historical diplomatic cables from the U.S. Department of State, including the Kissinger Cables, the Carter Cables, and Cablegate. These included U.S. foreign policy decisions during the Nixon and Carter administrations. Cablegate specifically—released six years earlier—refers to confidential documents that WikiLeaks obtained from U.S. embassies between 2003 and 2010 and is claimed to be the largest to have been released into the public domain.

March 7, 2017: WikiLeaks again published U.S. government documents, this time code-named Vault7, which detailed CIA hacking capabilities. According to WikiLeaks, this was the largest publication of classified CIA documents on the platform.

September 19, 2017: WikiLeaks released documents in a leak dubbed “Spy Files Russia,” which detailed information about surveillance contractors in Russia and the surveillance of Russian citizens.

November 5, 2017: The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists again released another data leak, this time known as the Paradise Papers. The papers revealed further assets connected to world leaders that are maintained in the shadow economy. Specifically, the papers provided records relating to former U.S. President Donald Trump, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, and major campaign donors to Trump.

September 28, 2018: WikiLeaks published a document from the

International Chamber of Commerce that revealed information involving a French state-owned company and the United Arab Emirates. This document detailed an arbitration dispute regarding a \$3.6 billion arms deal, in which UAE businessman Abbas Yousef Al Yousef claimed he was not paid his agreed-upon commission for the deal.

October 11, 2018: A whistleblower provided WikiLeaks with an internal document from U.S. company Amazon that detailed where the company maintains data centers across the globe.

August 12, 2019: An anonymous whistleblower submitted a complaint to the U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence regarding the Trump administration's interactions with Ukraine leading up to the 2020 U.S. presidential elections.

February 6, 2020: Chinese doctor Li Wenliang passed away after contracting COVID-19. He had attempted to warn colleagues in Wuhan, China about the outbreak of a virus similar to SARS. The Chinese Public Security Bureau forced Dr. Wenliang to sign a letter stating that he had disturbed the "social order" and suppressed any further efforts by him to warn the public about the novel coronavirus.

August 5, 2021: WikiLeaks published an archive entitled "The Intolerance Network," which detailed the practices of international rightwing campaign organizations.

October 3, 2021: The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists

assisted with efforts to leak massive data and documentation known as the Pandora Papers. These records uncovered economic inequality and wealth disparities in the world by exposing world leaders' offshore assets. The papers highlighted assets owned by King Abdullah II of Jordan and the Czech Republic's prime minister, among other leaders. Specifically, it was disclosed that the King of Jordan secretly obtained ownership of fifteen homes since 1999.

This information was of a secretive nature because the King used offshore companies to make these purchases, even accepting money from Western donors. This news aroused much controversy in Jordan and the wider region because the King was not previously known to have amassed this level of wealth.

February 20, 2022: A whistleblower leaked data from Credit Suisse, a bank that holds accounts for controversial heads of state and intelligence officials. The whistleblower exposed documents that revealed millions of dollars in assets of wealthy individuals, which confirmed and supplemented information from the Panama, Paradise, and Pandora Papers. It also exposed a Vatican-owned account that was used in spending 350 million euros in an allegedly fraudulent investment.

March 10, 2022: Internet hacking group Anonymous hacked a federal Russian database and released documents that revealed how Russian media censored information about the Russian military's role in Ukraine.

May 2, 2022: *POLITICO* obtained an initial draft majority opinion that

detailed how the U.S. Supreme Court planned to strike down the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision regarding the right to abortion access. U.S. Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito, who wrote the opinion, stated, “The inescapable conclusion is that a right to abortion is not deeply rooted in the Nation’s history and traditions.”

July 11, 2022: *The Guardian* published information about leaked documents relating to ride-share company Uber. Former chief lobbyist for Uber Mark MacGann leaked the documents, which cover the period between 2013 to 2017. The files exposed iMessages, WhatsApp messages, and other communications between former Uber CEO Travis Kalanick and other members of the

company, where they discussed how their operations in Europe and Asia, among other regions, negatively impacted the global taxi market.

The company stakeholders also put Uber drivers at risk by sending them to dangerous protests and acknowledged that ridesharing regulations were nonexistent. Moreover, the documents raised ethical questions about partnerships that government leaders maintained with Uber. For example, French President Emmanuel Macron used his political clout to assist Uber’s advance in France during his role as minister of the economy by influencing other policymakers in the French cabinet. ®