# **Chapter 10**

# **Fading dots, disappearing lines – Surveillance and Big Data in news media after the Snowden revelations**

Gunhild Tøndel (0000-0002-1622-1057) and Ann Rudinow Sætnan (000-0003-4147-7836)

**Abstract**

When Edward Snowden downloaded and leaked documents on US collection and analysis of vast masses of communications data, he did so for a purpose. When Alan Rusbridger, editor of *The Guardian*, decided to publish from those documents, he too had a purpose. According to Rusbridger, their shared purpose was to engender public debates on a number of issues concerning Big Data intrusions into citizens’ communications. In this chapter, Tøndel and Sætnan analyse three years of Norwegian print news accounts to see to what extent these issues entered and remained in that branch of public discourse. They find that the Snowden leaks were far more successful than earlier leaks on the same topic. They received far more, broader, and deeper coverage than was achieved by earlier whistleblowers. They even led to some efforts at political reform. However, for a story to have lasting effect, it must be continually retold. Yet in that retelling, a story may change shape. Tøndel and Sætnan find that the Snowden story, though still being retold two years after the initial leaks made headlines, has devolved into a simpler story, mainly about Snowden as a person. And although Snowden remains the hero of that simpler story, it is being retold with far less detail as to who or what is the villain and as to what citizens should be doing to contain that villain.

**Introducing the story**

Any event, person, place, stack of papers, object, any data set worth a story at all can be the basis for thousands of stories. Nothing has only one story to tell. Which stories we get to hear depends on the telling, which in turn depends on the tellers, the listeners, and the re-tellers. This chapter presents an analysis of the changing shape of Norwegian surveillance and Big Data discourse, with a story told by Edward Snowden as our device and empirical departure. The story has since been retold innumerable times – first by Glenn Greenwald and Laura Poitras, then by other journalists who picked up the story and retold it to their audiences, then by those audiences … and now again by us.

Stories exists within a sociohistorical matrix. As representations, they structure incidents, events and meanings – for instance through the presentation of a beginning, while even a beginning has antecedents. A story could always be told otherwise – resembling Everett Hughes’ (1984) familiar old mantra. A story could be told with flashbacks, flash-forwards, or chronologically. It could also be told as if no alternative story were possible, as if there existed a path dependent pattern (Bennett and Elman 2006) in the discourse that connected the dots in the first place – but of course, without executing full control over the readers’ or listeners’ convictions. Although our story will glance backwards to antecedents, to explore the surveillance/Big Data discourse we choose to begin with Edward Snowden’s decision to blow the whistle on US domestic surveillance.

Edward Snowden, in the course of his work as a cybersecurity analyst for various US surveillance agencies and contractors, became disenchanted with the workings of US surveillance, especially surveillance of US citizens’ communications with one another. He chose not to tell his own narrative based in the documents he downloaded. He chose to leave that to carefully chosen storytellers – journalists. To leave the telling to others is a strategy that has had success in many different storytelling traditions – from fairy tales to criminal investigations. He was also strategic in choosing which documents to reveal or not, carefully evaluating every document he disclosed to ensure that each was legitimately in the public interest – as harming people was not his goal, but transparency (Greenwald, MacAskill and Poitras 2013).

Over the course of retellings, any story is constantly changing. Stories change their shapes, their messages, their morals. They can also have many layers – stories in the stories in the stories. Our story is not like the original; for instance, it is not about US surveillance in itself, but about the *retelling* of that story in Norwegian newspapers in the months following the initial telling. That retelling consists of thousands of individual stories. Taken together, they make up a meta-story, which evolves as constituent elements, themselves stories in their own right, are added to and abandoned from the whole. We have followed the evolution of this story in Norwegian national and regional print newspapers.

Print newspapers are at once both lasting and ephemeral. Their stories are lastingly archived on paper and electronically. Yet most of those stories fade from public discourse in a matter of weeks, days, or even hours. This means that abandoned stories can always be revived by further re-tellings, but also that they *must* be retold and revived if they are not to fade into oblivion. Thus, over time the size and shape of the larger meta-story changes. Unless retold, it becomes smaller, thinner, somewhat ghostlike and frail. It may end up as a bunch of anecdotes without any obvious connections, or tamed from ‘lion’ to ‘kitten’, or even totally silenced. In this chapter, we explore both the duration of this meta-story in Norwegian print newspapers and the changes in how the story frames surveillance and Big Data over time. We will be focusing on two aspects of the evolving Snowden meta-story in the chosen newspapers, starting with *The Guardian*’s intended storyline – as (re-)told by editor Alan Rusbridger when receiving honorary doctorate in Oslo. We ask: Which issues raised by Rusbridger were included in Norwegian journalists’ initial retellings of the story, which issues have since faded from later retellings – and especially, how has the retold story in the Norwegian press dealt with the original story’s Big Data issues?

## **Rusbridger’s reasons**

Again, many stories could be told about why Snowden took and leaked secret documents. Many stories could be told about why those he leaked them to released (some of) them to the public. The journalists chose to let documents ‘speak for themselves’, although some storyline is implied by the choices they made of which documents to reveal and in what order. Both Greenwald and Poitras deferred, not only by choice but also of necessity, to further journalists who would take on their stories to be reframed and republished. Thus responsibility for the narrative was handed over from whistleblower to journalists to further journalists to readers and (it was hoped) on to kitchen table discourses (Gullestad 1984) and from there (it was further hoped) to activism.

For our story, we chose *The Guardian* as our focal point, not least because *The Guardian* was the source for so many of the further re-tellings in Norwegian newspapers. We chose *The Guardian*’s editor, Alan Rusbridger, as spokesperson for the staff’s journalistic reasoning as they chose what of Snowden’s materials to publish. From various occasions and formats where he has discussed those choices (e.g. Rusbridger 2013), we then chose to cite the acceptance lecture for his honorary doctorate from the University of Oslo (*ABC News* 2014). In this lecture, he conveniently listed the following 12 reasons as criteria for selection of documents being worthwhile to use in news stories, in accordance with Snowden’s instructions:

<Table 1 about here>

Rusbridger ends his list here, indicating that these 12 points are probably the most important, though perhaps not the only points he wished to open up for public discourse by publishing material from the documents Snowden provided. In an UK context, Dencik, Hintz and Cable (2016) found that the post-Snowden debate predominantly centred on techno-legal responses relating to the development and use of encryption and policy advocacy around privacy and data protection. Regarding the impact of that cumulative story in a Norwegian context, we will now explore two questions: i) which issues were repeated in the ongoing re-telling of and about the Snowden leaks, and ii) where did the media discourse on Snowden and NSA hit or miss its relevance to Big Data issues? But first, we describe how we accessed, read, interpreted and related the stories.

## **Tracing issues, reading stories as data material**

Mapping the formation, stretching, clustering and twisting of issues both in traditional and social-digital media is a well-known methodological and analytical task in social science. Recently, a social media research approach to controversy analysis has been developed within Science and Technology Studies (STS) and related fields (Marres and Moats 2015). This approach offers a growing repertoire of promising sophisticated quali-quantitative techniques for studying controversies within social media (Moats 2015). Inspired by the approach, we have done an analysis of the Snowden revelations in Norwegian news media stories, which clearly qualifies as a controversial matter. We have approached the collected articles related to the controversy as ‘containers of content’ (Prior 2004). When making this clear, it is with reference to the dichotomy of content and materiality being a recurring problem for STS and media studies (Gillespie, Boczowski and Foot 2014). E.g., it is discussed whether the recent move toward materiality has been at the expense of content (Moats 2015). Yet, as Suchman (2014) argues (and as we sympathise as well), in any given empirical case study, the content-material distinction is moot, at least for Actor Network Theory (ANT) inspired approaches.

As for the core work of data collection and sorting concerns, we have done this manually through searchable electronic archives and readily available figure and table calculations. The Norwegian and Swedish telegram bureaus, NTB and TT, operate a daily updated, searchable electronic archive of all Scandinavian print news media stories, Atekst–Retriever. Using the search terms ‘Snowden OR NSA’, we searched all Norwegian media in this archive for the years 2013-2015. This gave us the basic month-by-month numbers of article hits where either of these two words appeared. Then, for national and regional print news media, we downloaded the articles themselves from June of each of those years for closer reading. Reading through the articles, we systematically recorded reference details (newspaper, date, article title, page number) and a brief description of the central topic of each article. Simultaneously, we did analytical interpretations of: 1) the article’s thematic relationship to the NSA, to surveillance and/or to the Snowden leaks and Big Data issues, 2) the article’s modality (positive, neutral, negative) towards Snowden and towards any surveillance practices referred to, and 3) which (if any) of Rusbridger’s 12 points of public interest that were mentioned in the text. We also recorded excerpts from the article illustrating the analytical points.

Of course, the analytical data result from our own readings and judgment calls. We will enable readers to assess our judgments and form their own by illustrating three points about our judgment calls as regards which of Rusbridger’s issues any given article addressed and our assignment of modalities to the articles. First, when deciding which (if any) of Rusbridger’s issues to code as addressed, we did not consider it sufficient that we, as presumably more-than-averagely-interested readers, recognised a statement in an article as relevant to one of those issues. We only coded an issue as addressed if the journalist/author of an article or some person quoted within the article specifically mentioned that issue. For instance, an article mentioning the size of the NSA budget was not necessarily addressing the issues of proportionality and effectiveness, not unless they also mentioned the effectiveness side of that equation. However, we did code articles mentioning the presence or lack of effects of NSA surveillance as addressing this issue even if it did not mention costs, since claims of the presence or absence of effects – even independent of costs – are claims about effectiveness. We did not expect all contributions to a discourse on a given issue to fully represent Rusbridger’s presentation of those issues in the Oslo lecture – or, for that matter, even to agree with Rusbridger. We coded for contributions to debate on a theme, not for the specifics of those contributions.

Then, we coded each article for the overall modality of its references to Snowden and to the surveillance measures discussed in the article. We coded modalities as *positive* towards Snowden when texts referred to him – either exclusively, predominantly, or in conclusion – with positive-laden characterisations. *Negative* modalities towards Snowden referred to him – either exclusively, predominantly, or in conclusion – with negative-laden characterisations. Modalities were coded as *neutral* when Snowden was not mentioned at all; mentioned in terms of simple facts such as his age, or where he was seeking asylum; or mentioned in the form of quotes from various sources with both positive and negative sources cited and the journalist/newspaper not weighing in on the assessment through explicit conclusions, choice of article title, or selective use of sarcasm. Similarly for modalities on surveillance, with the addition that claims of fact based on surveillance as a source of those facts would be coded as positive. Care had to be taken to recognise any reversals of apparent modality made through the use of irony, which several news reports played upon.

In the text that follows, excerpts may contain our re-translations from Norwegian translations of statements or texts originally in English. Obviously, as in the children’s game called ‘Chinese Whispers’ in the UK or ‘Telegraph’ in the US, our translations may not revert to precisely the same words originally used. All such translations are therefore marked as our re-translations.

Now, we proceed to how the meta-story about surveillance after Snowden in Norwegian news media unfolds from 2013-12015, starting with surveillance in the media before Snowden, and then after Snowden year for year and issue for issue.

## **The story unfolds**

### The prequels

Snowden was not the first NSA whistleblower. Critical stories about US domestic and foreign surveillance had been launched in Norwegian news media prior to Snowden’s document leaks, but re-tellings of these were few and far between - at least in Norway by 2013 when we started our archive search (see Figure 1 below). Using our search terms (Snowden OR NSA) we found four stories from January through May 2013, prior to the first story about Snowden’s leaked documents. Each of these mentioned one or more of the earlier whistleblowers:

<Figure 1 about here>

During the five months before Snowden entered the public scene, the phenomenon of whistle-blowing appeared mostly in small fonts in the shadows of the daily news reports. January 25, 2013, the newspaper *Dag og Tid* wrote about controversy in the wake of the film *Zero Dark Thirty*. Pentagon officials suspected one of the filmmakers’ sources of being overly generous with details. But, as the film was flattering towards CIA and the military, it was seen as unlikely that this source would be prosecuted and punished as other leakers/whistleblowers had been.

Two weeks later, the left-wing daily *Klassekampen* ran a full-page story about the US hunting down whistleblowers. They list six whistleblower cases in the preceding five years, all convicted or still under prosecution. One of these, former NSA executive Thomas Drake, had been sentenced to one year in prison for revealing information about domestic surveillance. All but one of the charges against him had been dropped, so the one-year sentence seemed quite stiff.

March 27, 2013, the business newspaper *Dagens Næringsliv* published a multi-page feature article about William Binney under the title ‘The man who knew too much’. Like Drake, Binney had revealed information quite similar to some of what Snowden was soon about to reveal, but the newspaper didn’t know that at the time.

April 3, 2013, Norway’s largest newspaper, the conservative broadsheet *Aftenposten*, published a full-page commentary by their political editor, Harald Stanghelle, about Norwegian domestic surveillance. The Norwegian Parliamentary Control Committee on Investigative-, Surveillance- and Security Services was to deliver their annual report to the Parliament. Stanghelle predicted that the meeting would be ‘interesting’ (Stanghelle’s term and quote marks), as the report included incidents the committee had uncovered where surveillance organisations had targeted domestic journalists critical of their operations. Stanghelle highlighted parallels to William Binney’s revelations about the NSA.

May was a quiet month as far as NSA-related surveillance stories were concerned. Then, in June, the Snowden revelations began to draw Norwegian newspaper attention.

### One leak at a time

As Snowden’s revelations begin to appear, with Norwegian journalists picking up the story from *The Guardian* and (over time) also from other sources, references to the NSA and (once he reveals himself as the whistleblower) to Snowden leap from one to hundreds per month. Already in June that year, starting a day after *The Guardian*, on June 7, Norwegian print media are registered in Atekst/Retriever with over 300 hits for our search terms. Of these, discounting front-page teasers with only title and page reference, we downloaded and studied more closely the 275 that were in national and regional newspapers.

As one would expect in news media, article production is noticeably event driven. At this time, the chronology of the leaks followed first from the documentation that NSA had data on millions of telephone calls via Verizon. Then came the leaks that NSA’s so-called ‘PRISM’ program had accessed tele- and internet-traffic data from all the major service providers, that US agencies were hacking Chinese tele- and internet services, and that the British agency GCHQ had hacked tele- and email-communications of delegates to the G20 summit meeting. Besides the leaks themselves, there were also spin-off events from these and tangent events that related to these. Spin-off events that generated hits were Snowden revealing his identity, Snowden’s flight from Hong Kong to Moscow and search for asylum, Senate and Congressional hearings, a Norwegian defense lawyer being denied a visa to the US after communications with one of his clients were intercepted, and Norway and the EU demanding and receiving information and assurances from the US regarding how their citizens were being affected. In addition, President Obama’s visit to Berlin was coloured by the Snowden leaks that preceded it.

All but one of the 275 articles refers to one or more of these events, either explicitly or in recognisable hints. The one exception mentions the NSA in relation to a murder case from several decades earlier. While the initial leakages already struck Norwegian journalists as significant, resulting in dozens of articles, the discourse really picked up momentum when the Norwegian lawyer’s communications were intercepted and his visa application denied. This obviously made the closeness to and relevance for Norway more visible. From then on, the matter remained a hot news item throughout the month, with the exception of Sundays since Norway had few and thin Sunday newspapers at the time.

One would also expect that journalists, at least initially, might hesitate to jump to conclusions. This too appears to be born out in the data, as shown in Table 2 where, in keeping with that expectation, we see predominantly neutral modalities regarding the surveillance measures discussed and (once his identity is known) Snowden as whistleblower or leaker. However, it is worth noting that even though neutral modalities dominate overall, negative modalities regarding the surveillance practices in question far exceed positive ones. This is at first glance strikingly different from what we, together with colleagues from Sweden and Denmark, found to be the case for Scandinavian media discourse on surveillance in general (Backman, Johnson, Sætnan et al. 2015). Using various terms for surveillance as search terms, we found predominantly positive modalities in Scandinavian media discourse. However, a close examination of those data showed that modalities differentiated between various goals and scopes of surveillance: Targeted surveillance based on reasonable suspicion was discussed in positive or neutral terms; mass surveillance of whole swaths of the population was discussed more often in negative terms. Thus, the findings in our Snowden-related data are not so surprising after all.

<Table 2 about here>

We must also caution that our findings may to some extent have been coloured by those earlier findings, which may have enabled (or prejudiced?) us to recognise certain subtle expressions of modalities. For instance, we saw the recurring use of ‘massive’ and ‘millions of citizens’ in descriptions of the Verizon and PRISM data sweeps as expressions of shock and dismay and as references to privacy issues. E.g., some might read the following statement from the first article produced by our search as a bland, neutral statement of fact, revealing neither value judgments nor issues affecting those judgments: ‘It makes no difference whether they are suspected of anything illegal or not. The many millions of cell phone customers of Verizon … are all under surveillance’ (*Dagsavisen* 2013a). Thus, when we coded the above-excerpted article as engaging with the issues of privacy, legality and the role of the private sector and as carrying a negative modality towards the surveillance in question, our coding choices may reflect our earlier research experience. But then again, even an ordinary fluent-foreigner knowledge of Norwegian language[[1]](#endnote-1) points in the same direction. Norwegians tend to avoid superlatives, so the frequent occurrence of a word such as ‘massive’ is, by Norwegian standards, exceptional. Our modality reading becomes an even more obvious choice as the terms ‘massive’ and ‘millions’ are repeated in story after story, such as in the following excerpt from *Klassekampen* (2013a), with the title ‘This is how USA surveils the world’:

In the book *1984* where Big Brother sees everything, the Party says that ‘war is peace, freedom is slavery and ignorance is strength’. In today’s USA Obama’s positive-laden term ‘openness’ masks the development of a top secret and massive surveillance machinery with the capacity to surveil millions, perhaps billions, of people over the entire planet.

On the whole, we would characterise Norwegian newspapers’ initial coverage of the Snowden leaks as shocked, cautious but trending negative towards the practices unveiled, and taking a broad view of the implications of those practices. Given Rusbridger’s self-proclaimed goals for publishing from Snowden’s materials, and assuming that those goals are similar to Snowden’s own goals in obtaining and releasing them, Rusbridger and Snowden would have reason to be pleased with the initial coverage of the leaks in Norway – not only by its quantity and modalities, but also by the breadth of issues discussed in relation to the revealed surveillance practices. Of the 275 articles we read from June 2013, 66 touch on three or more of the issues Rusbridger wished to raise, often showing how the various issues intertwined with one another, as in the code-annotated excerpt below:

President Barack Obama used the press conference and his speech in Berlin to attempt to calm criticisms of the USA’s surveillance of telephone and internet traffic. But so far, he has not succeeded. [*foreign relations*] According to the recent Congress hearings [*role of Congress*] with the leadership of the National Security Agency (NSA), it has been stated that a number of terrorist actions have been averted as a result of this surveillance [*effectiveness*]. In that connection it was supposedly the internet traffic, rather than surveillance of telephone traffic, that was helpful. But not so much help that it averted the Boston terrorism, The Economist notes [*effectiveness*]. The NSA leadership demands to be believed when they say that terrorist actions have been averted, but they couldn’t say anything about specifics [*truth*]**.** It’s a matter of confidential documents. Congress is more concerned with surveillance of American citizens than of what the USA does to the rest of us in the world [*foreign relations*] who use Twitter or Google [*role of private sector*]. Merkel and other European leaders see that their citizens are free prey for American surveillance since they are customers of American multinational companies [*foreign relations, role of private sector*]. This is obviously a matter for concern. What long-term effects this may have on trust in American companies, everything from Apple to Facebook, is unknown [*risks to digital economy*]. So far, their stock values don’t seem to have been impacted by the furor. But European competitors may start using as a sales argument that they are outside the reach of American intelligence [*risks to digital economy*]. (*Aftenposten* 2013a)

Table 3 shows that almost all of the 12 issues raised by Rusbridger in his Oslo lecture were included in Norwegian media discourse on the Snowden leaks already in the week of the first two leaks – the one exception being the ‘nerdy’ issue of the integrity of the web and the need for encryption. That issue may well have been discussed in other media, such as technology journals or the tech web pages of on-line newspapers. It was also discussed in the mainstream media later, when brought up by Snowden in his televised lecture for the South by Southwest conference (Backman, Sætnan, Svenonius et al. 2015).

<Table 3 about here>

However, the figure also shows that not all issues received equal attention. Table 4 shows that the articles displayed a degree of complexity, with about two fifths of them mentioning and linking multiple aspects of the overall story. However, attention to even to the most prominent issues was soon deflected by discussions of Snowden’s character and his asylum situation once his identity was revealed. This is also bemoaned in several editorials and op-ed pieces towards the end of that month. New leaks did, however, revive attention to the issues. Thus the distribution of leaks over time appears to have been a successful strategy.

<Table 4 about here>

## **Connecting the dots - a closer look at how the issues were discussed**

Most of the 275 articles we included in our data material for 2013 were short and simple, neither elaborating on the issues nor linking them. Looking through the material issue by issue, we found that the journalists and other writers largely expressed agreement on most of the issues raised, but that there was debate on some and that they occasionally raised further aspects of these issues than those pointed out by Rusbridger in his Oslo lecture. We also see that some issues received far more attention than others.

To simplify our presentation here, we have grouped Rusbridger’s themes into several clusters (Table 5) according to how they relate to Big Data practices. This depends, or course, on our own framings of those issues. The clusters are thus groupings of convenience for the analysis at hand; for another analysis, they could have been clustered otherwise. To prioritise our presentation, we have further grouped the clusters according to how pertinent they are to current Big Data debates. The five issues in what we have called the framing cluster are core issues in Big Data critiques, for instance the question of informed consent for personal data (re-)use in a Big Data context, or the question of how Big Data practices affect privacy. The four themes in the regulation and measurement clusters are overarching issues across many technologies. The remaining themes, while not irrelevant, are more peripheral to core Big Data concerns. Of course, this peripheral status may be temporary. For instance, encryption as a defensive strategy against Big Data inclusion may become more common, or customers (even whole countries) may begin to boycott companies engaged in Big Data practices, making Big Data a real and immediate threat to the digital economy. For now, however, that threat is more latent or theoretical, with even surveillance usage of Big Data seen as a commercial opportunity. In other words, each of the issues Rusbridger points out as of public interest when it comes to NSA surveillance is also of public interest when it comes to Big Data more generally, but some are currently discussed more than others in Big Data debate literature.

<Table 5 about here>

All these issues are mutually entangled one way and another. Thus, media discourses on them may cut across themes and clusters. In what follows, we describe how Rusbridger’s issues combined (or not) in Norwegian news media the first weeks after the Snowden revelations. We begin with the framing cluster, as the issues there are at the core of Big Data debates.

### Framing issues

It is not surprising that issues such as consent, privacy, confidentiality, legality across technologies and the role of the private sector came up with primary relevance in our analysis – with privacy looming largest. With the revelations of Snowden internationally, privacy has risen in the general public discourse (Epstein, Roth and Baumer, 2014) – while also being a traditionally debated political concern. Looking at those articles in our material that elaborated on the issues and even on mechanisms that linked them, we found that privacy was linked to just about all the other issues mentioned by Rusbridger – with the exception of the encryption issue, which was not mentioned at all. But not all links received equal attention. Surprisingly, the connection to confidentiality, for instance, was rarely raised. Less surprisingly, when it did come up, it was most often mentioned regarding protection of journalistic sources.[[2]](#endnote-2) When stating that most attention was devoted to privacy in our data material, however, we must caution that we included references to freedom of expression as conflations with the issue of privacy rather than separating them out as a thirteenth issue. Only a few articles made this link to freedom of expression explicit, but enough did so that we took the link as given for others. As one excerpt, primarily concerned with political communications, states: ‘When legal communications are surveilled, this threatens freedom of information and expression’ (*Adresseavisen*, 2013). Other articles were more concerned with the everyday communications of ordinary citizens:

You thought perhaps that the picture of your baby that you posted on Facebook was only of interest to the nearest family? That your chat with your girlfriend on Skype was a matter between the two of you? … Indications are that you were wrong. While Uncle Sam’s watchers may not necessarily be interested in the miniscule details of your personal tracks on line, evidence is that they do have access to whatever of it they may wish to see. (*Klassekampen* 2013b)

In the same vein, at least three writers (a Norwegian left-wing politician, a refugee from South Africa and a China correspondent) reflected from personal experience as to how surveillance had impacted their lives and sense of independence. Note the links the China correspondent, excerpted below, makes to both freedom of expression and to foreign affairs – the latter an issue we will get back to later:

Once I was sitting in my kitchen in Beijing, talking about ‘girl stuff’ with my young daughter, when all of a sudden she put her finger to her lips and pointed up at the ceiling with her other hand, up to an imagined, hidden microphone: - Hush, mamma! They can hear us. That’s how ingrained the awareness of ‘Big Brother’ is in China, that even children behave in accordance with his presence. If you want to exchange sensitive information with anyone, you make plans to meet in a park. My e-mails were of course hacked and all my electronic communications forwarded to some, for me unknown, address. That was simply how it was. But the USA? As bad as China? … It seems ironic that news of this surveillance scandal should break just as China’s Xi Jinping and USA’s Barack Obama are to meet in California and argue over internet espionage. The watchers in Beijing must have been rubbing their hands with glee. (*Dagbladet* 2013)

While the connection to confidentiality was nearly invisible, far more frequently, the privacy issue was linked with the question of whether our voluntary use of digital services implied our consent to surveillance. The nature of consent was not discussed in great depth or breadth, focussing primarily on user naiveté, as in the examples below:

They didn’t have cell phones back when Stasi was surveilling German citizens. It’s easier for the American NSA, now that we make our lives transparent. [NSA] gathers information from the servers for Facebook, Google, Yahoo, Microsoft, Skype, Apple and YouTube. That means that our e-mails, Facebook updates, documents stored in the cloud and chats with friends are surveilled and picked through with an eye for suspicious content. … So where are the protests? Why is there so little anger to be found over the USA invading our privacy in a manner that means they could just as well have had cameras and microphones in our apartments? Could it be because, deep down, we already knew? … Perhaps we’ve thought it’s a good thing it’s the USA that’s first out with the technology … they defend many of the values we hold dear. Aside from privacy. … I would bet that for every person who's paranoid in this area, there are ten thousand who are naïve. (*Vårt Land* 2013)

Most people perceive their own internet activities as something deeply personal. And yet, we sign digital contracts with Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google and Apple without a peep of protest. Just to tell God and everyman what we ate for dinner, how it feels to lose a lover and what we did on the weekend, we readily hand over broad powers to commercial actors, so they can use our metadata to earn even more money. When security forces do the same, it’s a big scandal. What should they have done? Asked first? “Are you a terrorist?” We are comfortable with Mark Zuckerberg capitalising our lives voraciously, while our reflex is to damn to Hell those supposed to protect our security. It’s a paradox. When it comes down to it, it’s our own stupidity, and not spies, that constitutes the greatest threat to our privacy. (*Nordlys* 2013)

The other context that came up with some frequency and that we coded as addressing the issue of consent was when opinion polls were cited regarding whether people were inclined to accept or reject the surveillance practices revealed. For instance, according to *VG* (2013), an opinion poll recently published showed that Obama’s government had support for their surveillance policies, where ‘56 percent find that the authorities having access to their telephone data is “acceptable” … and 62 percent respond that it is more important to investigate terrorist threats, even at the cost of privacy.’ Of course, opinion polls are very sensitive to context (which one of the articles did mention) and to question phrasing and sampling techniques (which none mentioned). As one article wrote: ‘I think it’s fairly certain that if an opinion poll had been conducted without the Boston terror fresh in mind, the numbers would have been different … It is possible that the surveillance cases … may lead to a change … and that we will see the usual skepticism towards authorities turning up again.’ (*Aftenposten* 2013b)

### Overarching and peripheral attention

Many different themes brought the issue of *international relations* into Norwegian Snowden/NSA-related media coverage that month. One was whenever one country or another lodged a formal query or complaint. At the opposite end of the scale was the news of which countries were collaborating with NSA data collection. Related to that was the question of which countries’ data was being collected. And finally, other collaborative events were noticeably uncomfortable with espionage being so firmly and clearly in view. This was particularly ironic if the negotiations in question were about *data security*, or if cozy (even espionage-collaborative) relationships were being disrupted, such as the relationships described here: ‘NSA works closely with Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Great Britain’ (*Klassekampen* 2013c). Our data material contained quite an extensive list of such cozy-ness or at least, the importance of a frontstage appearance of cozy-ness:

Iran, Pakistan and Jordan top the list over countries USA’s military intelligence service NSA gathers information from, according the The Guardian (…) The overview shows that Norway is among the countries American intelligence is least interested in. (*Aftenposten* 2013c)

News articles about American surveillance of telephone conversations and data traffic are highly inconvenient for European and American bureaucrats. In July they should, according to plans, be embarking on difficult tug-of-wars over a free trade agreement. Privacy and information exchange are among the most difficult points on that agenda. (*Nationen* 2013)

Of course, our data material also contained a list of obvious *un*cozy-ness:

A spokesperson for the Turkish foreign minister writes in a comment that ‘the accusations in The Guardian are very worrisome, and we want an official and adequate explanation’. He states that it is alarming if the British have been spying on a NATO member nation. (*Dagens Næringsliv* 2013)

It was the head of USA’s national security agency NSA, General Keith Alexander, who last year described the theft of American economic secrets – by among others China – as ‘history’s greatest transfer of wealth’. But it doesn’t exactly make things easier for Obama to confront the Chinese now, that the unveiling of NSA’s widespread internet surveillance world-wide came on the same day that they began their summit meeting. (*Aftenposten* 2013d)

The role of the Parliament in all this was a topic at least one journalist thought Norwegians might need some help understanding. Here, that role is coupled intimately with the role of the private sector – which otherwise often was related to our main cluster, concerning the question of leakage of information over borders and industry boundaries related to consent and security:

There is one growth industry in the USA … large portions of that industry are growing with no others than a trusted few knowing what it’s doing. Not even US senators with marginal insight into its activities can tell anything about it in public without risking criminal proceedings against them. The security industry has achieved optimum status: A state-financed secret operation that is protected against any debate whatsoever as to the industry’s scale or methods. (*Dagsavisen* 2013b)

Finally, the issue of truth came up in two forms. One was about accusations of lying, tied to issues of parliamentary oversight, legality, and the nature of consent. How can oversight and consent be practiced if the truth of what we are regulating and consenting to is deliberately concealed? The other form concerned whether the data themselves revealed truths about the world under surveillance – a question almost identical to the issue of effectiveness and proportionality. Not infrequently, the two aspects were linked, for instance because the statements being questioned as possible lies concerned the effectiveness of the surveillance efforts. As one article concluded: ‘As long as the debate about privacy and security is based on documents stamped “confidential”, lies and secrecy, then it’s not worth much. In addition, there is much to indicate that the controversial data surveillance by all evidence is very ineffective’ (Dagsavisen 2013c).

### Full circle

Within three weeks of media analysis, we seemed to have come full circle. Norwegian press coverage of the Snowden leaks and of linked events rippling out from those leaks, began by touching on almost all of the themes Guardian editor Rusbridger later cited as grounds to publish from the leaked documents in the first place. Then, the coverage drifted for a time away from those topics and onto the subject of Snowden as a person. At the end of June, a new leak from the Snowden documents brought the Norwegian press back on topic. Again, the themes were linked together – not in detail, as journalistic texts are brief and simple after all, but with a concise clarity. The themes were being brought ‘home’, shown as relevant for Norwegian daily lives. This quote from June 29 is a fitting example:

The Norwegian state’s surveillance of its own citizens is strictly regulated by Norwegian law. The police, for instance, are not allowed to listen in on citizens’ conversations however they might please, but must get a warrant based on actual grounds for suspicion. Lately, however, intelligence services have found a way around this: Through collaboration with other countries’ security services they can whitewash information they themselves are not allowed to collect … USA’s explanations to Cabinet Secretary Pål Lønseth that their surveillance has been conducted legally is one we have growing reasons not to put faith in. Yesterday the news broke that the PRISM program, outside of all legal controls, has surveilled American citizens. By using information that has ‘been out for a walk’, PST [Norway’s security police] accepts USA’s surveillance.’ (*Klassekampen* 2013d)

Coverage that first month was dense and comprehensive. What happened as time and the news moved on?

## **Re-tellings taper off**

Looking back at Figure 1, we can see that retellings of stories generated by the Snowden revelations tapered off already after a few months. First, there is a marked dip in September. Norway held municipal and county elections early in October that year, so September’s newspapers were filled with election news, and surveillance had not become a Norwegian election issue, at least not at the municipal and county levels. Reporting on Snowden’s leaks and NSA surveillance surged back onto the news scene after the election, but not quite to the level of intensity from the summer and then continued to taper off in terms of numbers of stories.

One particular leakage may have signalled the end of the first, and most intense, half-year of Snowden/NSA coverage. On 29 November 2013, a story appeared in Norwegian news that NSA may have been spying specifically on Norwegian citizens. One of Snowden’s leaked documents contained a table of numbers of conversations recorded and a figure of several tens of thousands appeared in the column marked ‘against Norway’. The public was aghast, but only briefly. The next day an officer in Norwegian military intelligence claimed to recognise the number as corresponding to the number of conversations intercepted by Norwegian forces in Afghanistan and reported by them to the NSA. Could it be that ‘against’ in this instance was merely an accountancy term, as in ‘credited against the account of …’? Whether that episode somehow deflated a balloon of indignation, or caused journalists to be suddenly more cautious, or was simply a coincidence to other factors that pushed the Snowden/NSA story to the margins of the news is hard to say. Whether a cause or a coincidence, numbers of stories fell steeply at around that time. And yet, the theme has still not entirely disappeared from view.

### One year later

Figure 2 shows that ‘hit’ numbers continued to fall off in 2014, but remained in double digits per month throughout the year with an apparent surge to 92 articles per month in June and again in July. We have chosen to take a closer look at the articles from June 2014, one year after the initial document releases.

<Figure 2 about here>

That month our archive search produced 92 hits for the search terms ‘Snowden OR NSA’ in Norwegian print newspapers overall, 74 of these in national and regional print newspapers. Though markedly fewer than the 300+ hits per month the summer before, it is still obviously far more than the single-if-any hits regarding earlier NSA whistleblowers in the first months of 2013.

Reading through the 74 articles in national and regional newspapers, we see some of the impact of Snowden’s leaks and also some of their limitations as instigators of an ongoing public discourse. On the one hand, they show Snowden and the NSA to have become standard references, metaphors if you wish, invoking certain storyline positions. For the most part, references to Snowden invoke a David-fighting-the-giant-Goliath-on-behalf-of-us-all image, whereas NSA and the US are cast as the giant, the oppressor, or a once-benevolent-leader-unfortunately-run-amok. We see this, for instance, when Snowden’s name comes up as a comparison in the context of a computer game review (03 June). Similarly, in *Dagsavisen*’s regular listings of Oslo cinema schedules – 15 of the month’s 74 hits – the blurb for the film *Captain America: the Winter Soldier* reads: ‘Sci-fi-drama that goes further in its criticism of Obama’s drones and the NSA than most Hollywood productions have dared, and gets away with it since the message is wrapped up in a superhero film’ (*Dagsavisen* 2014 and 14 other hits starting 02 June 2014). To have become a pop-culture icon, ones name serving as metaphor for a more ideal hero (or, in the story of the abandoned cat given the name ‘Snowden’ by its rescuers (*Aftenposten* 25 June 2014, p. 22), serving as metaphor for a persecuted individual worth saving), and to have stamped the agency one set out to rein in as a pop-culture ‘bad guy’, is certainly some indication of success in establishing a popular discourse.

Another indication of discourse success is that only two of the 74 hits lean towards a negative modality when referring to Snowden. For one of these, negativity is only a matter of the article’s title (*Adresseavisen* 2014), stated ‘Snowden er en forræder’ [Snowden is a traitor]. The body of the article is neutral in that it states a number of opinions on Snowden’s historical, political and judicial status and uses named sources to voice each of these. Multiple nearly identical articles in other newspapers have neutral or positive-leaning headlines – e.g. ‘Professors wish to give Snowden the peace prize’ (*Aftenposten* 2014) or ‘Snowden must receive the peace prize’ (*Dagsavisen* 2014). The other negative article is a letter to the editor arguing against awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to Snowden (Matlary 2014). Aside from these two, all remaining articles lean either positive or maintain a neutral stance regarding Snowden and lean either negative or neutral regarding mass surveillance. Given the generally positive modalities used in Norwegian newspaper articles regarding surveillance more generally (Backman, Sætnan et al. 2015), this negative take on surveillance when coupled with Snowden’s leaks and the NSA is remarkable.

And yet, these same 74 hits also reveal some of the limitations of the post-Snowden discourse one year in. One is that it takes various sorts of events to keep reviving the story. June 2014 saw several such events: One was the publication of nominations for that year’s Nobel Peace Prize, with Snowden among the 278 nominated individuals and organisations. Another was that some of those who nominated him released to the press a detailed letter arguing for his candidacy. Others came out in support thus generating a story within the larger story. This story accounts for 17 of the 74 hits. An interview with Snowden where he mentions having sought asylum in various countries, including Brazil generated seven of the hits. Announcement of plans for a film about Snowden to be directed by Oliver Stone accounts for five hits. Publication and reviews of Greenwald’s book about Snowden generated three more. A German decision to investigate the purported US hacking of Angela Merkel’s cell phone generated four hits, one of them a more general analysis of what we now should know about our susceptibility to surveillance on line and on phone. The Merkel cell phone investigation can be seen as a downstream event or ‘ripple effect’ from earlier Snowden leakages. A more direct new leakage event generated two hits about Denmark’s collection and transmission of tele- and internet traffic data for the US.

In sum through this month of articles, the Snowden/NSA story has been simplified. Almost all the ‘dots’ and lines drawn between them have disappeared. Only seven of Rusbridger’s 12 points of public interest are discussed at all (Table 6). Only one article links three of them, eight articles pair two themes each, the rest mention a single theme or none at all (Table 7). The theme garnering the most attention is that of international relations, which is touched on ten times, mostly in connection with the issue of Angela Merkel’s telephone. The issue of privacy is raised in six articles, legality and the role of the private sector in three each, consent and truthfulness in two each, and encryption once. The remainder of the stories concern Snowden as a person or secondary media events such as a book release or film plans. In other words, the issues Snowden and Rusbridger were hoping we would discuss are either fading from view or those discussions have come to be taken so for granted that they hardly any longer are mentioned.

<Table 6 about here>

<Table 7 about here>

### Two years later

The following year saw a further decline in the numbers of stories about ‘Snowden OR NSA’, with another surge at the 2-year mark in June. From hit numbers in the low double digits, suddenly June 2015 produced 126 hits in our search of all Norwegian print sources indexed by Retriever, 115 of these in national and regional newspapers.

<Figure 3 about here>

Reading through those 115 June stories in national and regional newspapers, we find that some of what we saw the year before still holds true: Firstly, the resurge remains event-driven. On 2 June we see nine stories about US Senator Rand Paul’s filibuster which delayed voting on the so-called FREEDOM Act and prevented unamended renewal of the similarly euphemised and acronymed PATRIOT Act which it was to replace. Two further stories on the same event followed on 3 June, another two followed several days later when the FREEDOM Act was passed, after which that event faded to an occasional indirect mention as an aside in other stories.

In response to the next event, 45 stories focus on the conservative Norwegian cabinet not being willing to guarantee safe passage for Snowden to receive the Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson Prize (a prize honoring efforts for freedom of speech) at the annual awards ceremony. This story hit the news on 3 June, triggered by the Bjørnson committee’s letter to the cabinet requesting such a guarantee and initial responses from the Minister of Justice declining to offer one. After a flurry of articles for a couple of days, the story continued to generate a trickle of mentions in various forms (letters to the editor, questions in weekly news quizzes), then surged to a new two-day flurry two weeks later when a written reply from the cabinet reiterated that no such guarantee would be offered.

Other events triggered smaller numbers of articles. Four were in response to Norwegian security police ransacking the home of film journalist Ulrik Imtiaz Rolfsen in search of tapes from his interview with a Norwegian Islamist activist. Two reported on a purportedly Chinese hacker attack on US federal web sites containing data about millions of employees. Six mentioned or commented on a proposal by Norway’s Socialist Party to establish safe web zones for whistleblowers on the Norwegian-owned domains .bv (Bouvet Island) and .sj (Svalbard). Another six were about new Wikileaks revelations concerning US espionage against allied countries’ leaders. In all, these five events accounted for two thirds of that month’s search hits.

The stories are also, for the most part, kept short and simple and raise few, if any, of Rusbridger’s points of public interest regarding surveillance (See tables 8 and 9). For instance, two of the articles on Senator Rand Paul’s filibuster against the FREEDOM and PATRIOT Acts do not mention any of Rusbridger’s points. E.g. *Aftenposten*’s article 2 June 2015 on page 16 in which the reference to the NSA simply states that ‘Central portions of the anti-terror law Patriot Act, which among other things authorises the National Security Agency (NSA) to collect telephone data on a grand scale, expired at midnight.’ However, where the Rusbridger issues had all but disappeared as of June 2014, the June 2015 articles show that, given new events and stories, they could still be revived, at least to some extent.

<Table 8 about here>

<Table 9 about here>

Most of the articles about that event mention only one of Rusbridger’s points, namely the issue of privacy. Even then, the mention is fleeting. For instance, *Klassekampen* (2 June 2015, p. 16) writes: ‘Critics are calling it a “zombie version of the Patriot-Act”, a law that will live on even if the current version dies. Many, including Paul, hold that the reform does little to limit the NSA’s abililty to invade privacy or conduct espionage.’ However, the article in *Dagbladet* (2 June 2015, p. 12) manages to squeeze in references to (or at least hints at) the nature of consent, the role of Congress, the role of the private sector, legality across technologies, and privacy by tucking some key words and quotes into a few short sentences:

Congress has passed a solution [*role of Congress*] where collection of cell phone data is done by the service providers themselves [*role of private sector*], and not by central authorities, says Melby. The Act will, if it in fact passes, imply that investigators will have to get a warrant to access specific information [*legality across technologies*] … The judgment emphasised that surveillance before the leak was illegal because it wasn’t authorised by Congress [*role of Congress*]. The judge, Gerard Lynch, wrote at the time, according to Reuters, that an authorisation would have represented an ‘unprecedented contraction of the privacy [*privacy*] expectations [*nature of consent*] of all Americans’.

The paucity and brevity of references touching on the points Rusbridger aimed to raise was typical throughout the material. All of the Rusbridger’s points were mentioned at least once during that month, but almost only in fleeting terms – a single sentence, a phrase, or even just a single word. In contrast to the first month of coverage of the Snowden leaks, the importance of these issues for democracy or for people’s daily lives was hardly discussed at all in the newspaper material two years after the initial leaks.

## **Conclusions**

Stories matter. Snowden and the journalists he channelled his leaks through had goals in telling those stories. They intended to engender public discourse, not only for the sake of discourse itself, but also with the idea that the discourse might lead to activism and thus to self-protective on-line behaviours (such as those discussed by Fleischhack in this volume) and legal reforms (as discussed by Schneider in this volume). Given Rusbridger’s specific theme goals for publishing from Snowden’s materials, and assuming that those goals are similar to Snowden’s own goals in obtaining and releasing them, Rusbridger and Snowden would have reason to be pleased with the initial news media coverage of the leaks in Norway – not only by its quantity and modalities, but also by the breadth of issues discussed in relation to the revealed surveillance practices. First, measured in presence, the story of surveillance after Snowden has had much greater and more lasting success than earlier NSA whistleblowers had in the Norwegian news media. Snowden’s whistle-blowing has also had more political effectiveness internationally than earlier whistle-blowers have managed to create. Clearly, Snowden strategised well with his choice of documentary method, together with the other actors enrolled into the network of leakage activity that Snowden set up. Thick documentation with solid provenance, followed up by journalistic craftsmanship worthy of a chess grand master did pay off, to some extent. As Bauman et al. (2014) state, to keep the issues raised by Snowden in the public eye over a longer term than the usual brief media interest normally permits is an achievement of some very canny whistle-blowing. Even though the story later became event-driven in the Norwegian news, new leaks did revive attention to the issues. Thus, the distribution of leaks over time appears to have been a successful strategy, as described in several books, among others by Greenwald himself and in Laura Poitras’ documentary *Citizenfour*. Our analysis clearly illustrates the complexity and emergent character of the explored topic from it was launched in June and the immediately following months in 2013 and how it was further re-told the coming years after, in a Norwegian context.

Nevertheless, in the Norwegian context, the story shrunk and withered under pressure of time, counter-stories, and just plain reduction down to news article format. The political and judicial reforms too are limited in scope. The story became event-driven and in the end also mainly a story of Snowden, the person. When Snowden flew from Hong Kong to Moscow and searched for asylum, consequences of exposing the whistleblower became bodily and geographically very visible, containing both human sweat, nervousness *and* high-stake international politics. This is a much easier story to manage than the spiderweb of high stakes politics, institutions, concerns and values first sketched up by the revelations. The transition in frame and message - typically a result of practical media logic in action (and perhaps especially so in the post-fact society) – seems in our data material to especially be a drawback in terms of the opportunity for the Big Data topic to more thoroughly enter the general public debate. The relevance of the revelations to Big Data crumbled early in the coverage. However, it may also express how we – of necessity – deal with the world. Both the socio-technical network of Big Data and the data itself are messy (Cukier and Mayer-Schoenberger 2013). Even descriptions of individual cases and controversies within the larger picture are likely to share that characteristic. In compressing such messy, complex issues down to media size, simplification seems inevitable – even for issues with serious and immediate consequences (Bauman et al. 2014). In this instance, Snowden contributed to the simplification himself when presenting the case as about Big Data in the hands of the State rather than Big Data writ large. But, perhaps simplification is also how larger, messier messages get out, bit by bit.

What then of distractions and simplifications that also entail a change of theme? While the turn from issues of surveillance, state power and Big Data to Snowden the person may be a sign of messaging failure, it is also to some extent a sign of success. Looking at the overall trajectory of the story, journalists began by using vague and dramatic terms such as ‘massive’ and ‘millions’ to describe the horizon of data collection or people concerned. While such terms more than hint that processes referred to as Big Data are actually in play (Lyon 2014), they can make it difficult for news readers to identify how surveillance relates to individuals. After the initial weeks of broad framing of the leaks, the journalistic coverage of the case derails, so to speak, into concentration on Snowden as a person. However, simultaneously, we find that Snowden and the NSA have become standard references or metaphors in the public discourse, invoking certain storyline positions, with Snowden as David and the NSA and the US as the giant oppressor or Goliath. With only a handful of articles leaning towards a negative modality when referring to Snowden, readers are invited to identify with Snowden as a folk hero. Given the generally positive modalities used in Norwegian and other Scandinavian newspaper articles regarding surveillance more generally (Backman, Johnson et al. 2015), the negative take on broad, warrantless surveillance, as when coupled with Snowden’s leaks and the NSA, is worth noting.

The term ‘story’ gives familiar associations to narrative accounts of events or for instance, a work of history, a real or fictional incident or an anecdote. Our analysis shows that this term is representative for the fate of the Snowden revelations in Norwegian surveillance discourse, and also for framing of the NSA and other secret services’ mass surveillance practices and of the miserable situation of Edward Snowden. As we sketched in the introduction, stories are phenomena that must be retold and revived if they are remain prominent in public discourse. Unless retold, they become smaller, thinner, somewhat ghostlike and frail – perhaps even devolving into a frazzle of anecdotes without any obvious connections. However, silences produced through such fading away processes are not necessarily synonymous with the story becoming powerless on behalf of those it concerns. Silence can have several important functions in discourses, such as representing the invisible that ties the visible together. Silence may even represent the opposite of the lack of sound, turning from absence of voices into screams for attention.

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1. Tøndel is a native speaker of Norwegian with acquired fluency in English. Sætnan is a native speaker of American English with acquired fluency in Norwegian. The contrast between American usage and Norwegian non-usage of superlatives is especially striking when seen from these complimentary fluent but non-native perspectives. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. As in the article excerpted here: ‘The so-called PRISM-program enables the NSA to gather all types of information, such as search histories, the contents of e-mails, file transfers and live chats. The matter has enormous principled importance, and represents an overwhelming threat against privacy, protection of sources, national security and the right to independent political activity the world over. Its impact increases apace with the companies in question taking control over more and more public and private communications in an increasing proportion of the world.’ (*Klassekampen* 2013b) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)