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The WhistleBlowing of Edward Snowden: Heroic Self-Sacrifice or Villainous Betrayal?

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THE WHISTLEBLOWING OF EDWARD SNOWDEN: HEROIC SELF-SACRIFICE OR VILLAINOUS BETRAYAL?

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What does the United States government know about you?

The NSA has the phone records of every call you make. Secret court orders allow the NSA to mandate phone companies to turn over the phone records of all of their customers. They know when you call people and two whom you are speaking. They also collect 194 million text messages per day through their Dishfire program. Since 9/11, the NSA has started collecting this information about every U.S. citizen, not just people who they suspect as a threat to national security (Szoldra, 2016).

A program called PRISM allows the NSA to request access to server information from Google, Facebook, Apple, and other tech companies about their users. They can also survey the data sent from users to their Google cloud accounts without the company's knowledge. Another

program called Tempora helps the NSA get information from the British Government Communication Headquarters, which seizes information from the global internet. Many other countries also feed information to the NSA. Simply put, the NSA knows everything you do on the web thanks to a global program called XKeyscore. XKeyscore allows the NSA to retroactively, and in real time, search for not only metadata, but also content of personal emails and internet searches. Other user data collection programs include EvilOlive, Stellar Wind, and Upstream (Szoldra, 2016).

You might think this isn't a problem if your computer and software are encrypted. But the NSA is also able to circumvent the most common web encryption technologies. When their surveillance fails, their elite hacker team, the Tailored Access Operations, can hack into and infect suspicious computers with malware (Szoldra, 2016).

Does this concern you or do you feel protected? Are you glad to know this information or would you rather have remained blissfully unaware? And most importantly: Do you think the man who copied and leaked this information is a hero or a villain?

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter will examine Edward Snowden's actions and their impact on society. First, we will give an in-depth biographical recount of Snowden's journey from his early life through the document leak. It will be framed in the context of the traditional hero's journey, but it is important to keep in mind that a villainous journey follows a very similar trajectory, with a few alternations. After examining Snowden's life experiences that led to his whistleblowing, Snowden's position on the hero-villain spectrum will then be analyzed from the perspective of three different theoretical positions in the field of heroism science.

First, we will determine whether Snowden exhibited the three foundations of moral heroism, as detailed by Walker (2017). We will analyze Snowden's developmental roots, his redemption from his failures early in life, and his use of agency and communion. Subsequently, we will discuss whether Snowden's career with the CIA led to moral heroism as detailed by Dik et al (2017). We will question whether Snowden felt a "calling" to use his skills to expose corruption

and we will juxtapose this with the possibility that his career actually led him to become a villain. Finally, we will use the work of Janoff-Bulman & Bharadwaj (2017) to discuss the moral convictions that led to Snowden's actions.

After framing Snowden's actions within the context of these three different theoretical positions, we will attempt to conclude whether Edward Snowden is a hero or a villain. We will identify his heroic traits and his villainous traits and we will account for his motivations and intentions, as well as his societal impact. This will allow us to determine if Snowden's actions were subjectively or objectively heroic, using guidelines set by Allison, Goethals & Kramer (2017), and compare this determination with the concept of subjective villainy as proposed by Allison and Goethals (2017). The chapter will conclude by summarizing the information presented and considering some final thoughts and remaining questions about the topic.

THE HEROIC (OR VILLAINOUS) JOURNEY OF EDWARD SNOWDEN

Overview of the Hero's Journey

According to Joseph Campbell (1949), a heroic journey involves a transformation of setting, a transformation of self, and a transformation of society (Allison & Goethals, 2017). These transformations occur during the phases of departure, initiation, and return. A traditional hero begins a journey when they are cast into an unfamiliar world (departure) where they overcome obstacles with the help of friends and mentors. These obstacles (initiation) help them find their missing inner quality. They must then return to the familiar world and use their new transformed knowledge to advance society in some meaningful way (Allison & Goethals, 2017). Let's take a look at Edward Snowden's journey to determine whether it should be classified as heroic.

Early Life in a Familiar World

Snowden was born in North Carolina in 1983, but lived most of his life in Fort Meade, Maryland. Interestingly, Fort Meade is home to the National Security Agency, which Snowden would later expose. Snowden's family played a large role in his decision to work for the government. His grandfather was an Admiral in the Coast Guard and then worked for the FBI, but he was killed while working

in the Pentagon on 9/11. Snowden stated that “in one way or another” his whole family worked for the federal government. His father worked for the Coast Guard and his mother was a chief deputy in the United States District Court for Maryland (Harding, 2014). Being surrounded by government employees his whole life, it was probably expected that Snowden would work for the government as well. Working for the government may not have been Snowden’s ideal career, especially since his grandfather died while working for the government.

Departure from Normal Childhood

Edward Snowden had a fairly normal upbringing until he reached his teenage years, when he departed into unfamiliar territory. He was described by his family and friends as a genius, yet he never finished high school or received a college degree. He dropped out of high school because he contracted mononucleosis and was out of classes for several months due to the sickness. Instead of finishing school, he passed the GED and began taking classes in computer technology at Anne Arundel Community College before joining the army (Harding, 2014). This transformation of setting from normal childhood into the unfamiliar world of community college and the army set Snowden on the trajectory toward his personal transformation.

Personal Challenge: Grandfather’s Death

On September 11, 2001, the terrorist attacks took the lives of almost 3,000 people. Snowden’s grandfather was included among the casualties. Snowden’s grandfather, Edward J. Barrett was a senior official for the FBI who had also worked for the United States Coast Guard (Harding, 2014). Barrett was working in the Pentagon the day of the terrorist attacks and was unfortunately working in the section of the building directly struck by the terrorist-controlled jetliner. There is little to no information about Snowden’s relationship with his grandfather, as Snowden preferred to keep his private life out of the spotlight as much as possible. However, the loss of a loved one is always challenging and we can reason that this tragedy was difficult for Snowden to overcome.

Personal Challenge: Army Discharge

In 2004, Snowden enlisted in the Army Reserve. Perhaps this enlistment was in response to his grandfather’s death in the 2001 terrorist attacks, indicating that

Snowden may have been deeply affected by this tragedy and motivated to protect his country. Edward Snowden was discharged from the army due to injury he incurred during training, so he never got to officially join the armed forces and represent his country (Bamford, 2014). At this point, Snowden had left high school and the army because of health and injury issues. These setbacks must have been emotionally difficult and one can speculate that Snowden may have felt like a failure. With no college degree and no position in the army, Snowden turned his attention toward his career.

Professional Challenge: Corruption at First Job

Snowden began working for the CIA in 2006 and was quickly noticed for his computer abilities. The CIA trained him as a technical specialist and assigned him a diplomatic position in Geneva, Switzerland. Though the job came with many perks, including a four-bedroom apartment on Lake Geneva, Snowden quickly became unhappy in his role. He recalls a time when the CIA got a Swiss banker drunk and encouraged him to drive home. Upon his arrest, the CIA offered their legal help to the banker if he agreed to become an informant for them (Bamford, 2014). This was Snowden's first major exposure to government and security corruption. He was faced with a moral challenge. He could either turn a blind eye to the corruption he was privy to, take part in the corruption, or he could do something to stop it. Snowden chose to resign in 2009. He did not participate or condone the corruption, but he also did not actively do anything to stop it. Instead, he made his stance known by leaving the company. This was a moral obstacle that Snowden faced on his hero's journey. Though he was not yet ready to take a heroic stance against corruption, this experience lay the groundwork for future obstacles.

Professional Challenge: Access to Government Documents

Snowden began working for Dell in 2010 on their CIA account. This is where his journey to the document leak began. As he examined the CIA system and had access to NSA documents, he became concerned about the legality of the government's program (Bamford, 2014). The documents he had access to described mass surveillance of US citizens and international groups without a warrant. According to the Fourth Amendment:

"The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants

shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.”

Snowden believed that the NSA's programs of surveillance were in violation of the 4th Amendment. He began downloading documents from Dell in 2012 after he expressed concern to higher officials in the company, but no action was taken. In 2013, he quit his job at Dell after finding documented evidence of both the NSA Director, Keith Alexander, and the Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, lying under oath to Congress about their surveillance programs (Poitras, 2014). This was the last straw and turning point that led to Snowden's commitment to show the world all the injustices he was privy to. At this point, Snowden had been exposed to many counts of corruption and had attempted to take steps to stop it. But when his voice was not heard, he again resigned from his position. However, this time he planned to do more than turn his back on the wrongs by exposing the injustices to the public. Snowden took a job at Booz-Allen Hamilton to collect more documents before leaving the country in 2013 to leak his story from abroad, moving instantaneously from an ordinary citizen to exiled whistleblower at the young age of 29 (Bamford, 2014).

The Exposé

Edward Snowden contacted filmmaker Laura Poitras via encrypted emails in 2013 with a huge story and asked her to involve a reporter named Glenn Greenwald. The pair, along with The Guardian reporter Ewen MacAskill, flew to meet their informant in Hong Kong, where they received about 200,000 highly classified government documents and instructions from Snowden to use what they thought was appropriate for exposing the injustices of the NSA programs. He reminded them that the information was classified and could put people at risk, meaning that encryption and redacting was a key part of the document release. He also stated that he involved the journalists because he did not want to decide, himself, which documents went to the public, in order to prevent his own biases from playing a role. The reporters began publishing stories immediately, and the whole process lasted about eight days (Poitras, 2014).

Snowden stated from the start of the process that he wanted to identify himself to the public. He said that he did not want to hide from his actions because he believed that he did the right thing and was not intimidated by the government. By taking a public stand, he hoped to make the issue more about the surveillance programs and less about uncovering who the whistleblower was. He also hoped

to save his family and long-time girlfriend (who were all unaware of his plans) from interrogation and threats. Furthermore, he was certain that the NSA would eventually discover his identity, so he felt it was more powerful to be transparent from the start (Poitras, 2014).

Snowden clearly stated in his interviews with documentary filmmaker, Laura Poitras, that he was tired of the “expectation of being watched” and that he was more willing to risk imprisonment than the “curtailment of intellectual freedom for himself and others.”

“I want to spark a worldwide debate about privacy, internet freedom, and the dangers of state surveillance. I’m not afraid of what will happen to me. I’ve accepted that my life will likely be over from my doing this. I’m at peace with that. I know it’s the right thing to do.” – Edward Snowden via email correspondence with Laura Poitras (Greenwald, 2014)

Edward Snowden did, indeed, spark a worldwide debate. American citizens discussed whether losing privacy meant losing their ability to speak freely, thereby losing their liberty. They argued about whether it is necessary to put all people under surveillance in order to protect national security (Greenwald, 2014). And they also argued about whether Edward Snowden was a hero or a traitor for blowing the whistle on NSA domestic and international surveillance abuses.

Societal Impact

Snowden’s whistle blowing transformed society. Specifically, his document leak impacted the public, the government, and international relations. Due to high press coverage, the whole world knew about the leaked documents in days. Soon, American citizens organized a “Restore the Faith” rally in more than 80 cities throughout the US and on July 4, 2013, over 10,000 people protested against mass electronic surveillance. The pentagon estimated there were billions of dollars spent toward damage control. According to a Reuter’s poll, 31% call Snowden a whistleblower, 23% call him a traitor, and over half felt they could not judge one way or the other. Regardless, Snowden’s exposé rocked the nation and many felt empowered to know what the government was really doing with their personal information (The Courage Foundation, 2016).

In response to Snowden, many people called for change in the American government's surveillance policies. There have been about 30 proposals for legislative reform that have been unsuccessful and several constitutional challenges and law suits. An alteration to the United States Constitution would be one of the most major changes possible for our society (The Courage Foundation, 2016).

From an international relations perspective, many countries, including Australia and Germany, launched NSA investigations and the America's relationship with international allies has become strained. Germany ended contracts with Verizon Wireless and Boeing's contract with Brazil was cancelled. As a result, governmental and business relationships have suffered. Further, the Department of Defense claims that the leaked documents put troops from four major military branches at risk, adding another element of endangered lives (The Courage Foundation, 2016). Because Snowden's actions transformed society in such a mixed way, it has been challenging for many people to determine whether he is a hero or a villain.

Asylum

Snowden was not able to remain in the United States because he was a wanted man, unsafe in his own country. Knowing this fact, he leaked his documents from abroad and, after the exposé, he kept a low profile and avoided capture. He sought asylum in many other countries. Here are the nations to which Snowden applied for asylum, along with their initial responses: Austria (no), Bolivia (possible), Brazil (no), China (no information), Cuba (no response), Ecuador (no), Finland (no), France (no information), Germany (unlikely), Iceland (no response), India (no), Italy (no), Ireland (no), The Netherlands (no), Nicaragua (no response), Norway (unlikely), Poland (no), Russia (no), Spain (no), Switzerland (no), Venezuela (possible) (Siddique, 2013).

Does the fact that most countries declined Snowden's request indicate that they viewed Snowden as a villain? It seems more likely that many refused Snowden's application because he was not currently in their country and his life was not in immediate danger. After a 40-day limbo period during which the U.S. had suspended Snowden's passport, he was finally granted asylum in Russia, where he remains to this day (Poitras, 2014).

Snowden's choice to leak the documents prevented him from ever returning to the United States, where he would face charges of espionage. In addition to

leaving behind his home and family, Snowden also left his girlfriend of many years, Lindsay Mills, who claims to have had no knowledge of his plans to flee the country. In 2014, Mills moved to Moscow to be with Snowden, and now lives there part time due to visa restrictions (Poitras, 2014). After a long and tumultuous path, many people are still undecided about whether Snowden's journey was a heroic or villainous one.

SNOWDEN'S FOUNDATIONS OF MORAL HEROISM

We now examine Edward Snowden's actions through various lenses of heroism research to determine whether he fits the heroic mold, or, contrastingly, the villainous one. To begin, we will discuss the work of Walker and Frimer (2017), which proposes three foundations of moral heroism: developmental roots, redemption, and agency/communion.

Snowden's Developmental Roots

Walker and Frimer (2017) discuss the importance of foundational relationships early in life that prepare a person to become a hero. These relationships could include family members, friends, or mentors. Since we know that all of Snowden's family members worked for the government in some way, this is a very interesting point to analyze. Snowden likely looked up to his grandfather, parents, and older sister, all of whom had successful government jobs. These relationships likely motivated him to apply for government jobs with the CIA. However, once he obtained these kinds of jobs, he was exposed to their questionable practices, which was likely shocking and very difficult to handle. When you find out that the people you admire are involved in a business that is immoral at times, it can be confusing and perhaps even shattering. So, while Snowden did have these foundational relationships at a young age, they also played a role in his future distrust of government agencies.

Redemption

Walker and Frimer (2017) discuss redemption as the ability to make something good out of a bad event -- an ability that is crucial to the formation of a moral hero. Snowden faced many setbacks on his path to transformation. When he contracted mononucleosis in high school and was not able to complete his degree, he could have simply dropped out and gotten a job at a fast food chain. But instead,

he was able to turn this negative event into something positive by earning his GED and taking classes at community college. When he was discharged from the army for injuries, he could have easily sunk into depression and felt like a failure. Instead, Snowden searched for jobs and was eventually offered his position with the CIA. These two instances certainly illustrate Snowden's resilience and ability for redeem himself.

However, once Snowden entered the phase of his life that involved working for the government, his redemptive qualities became hazier. When Snowden learned of the moral infractions of the NSA, the redemptive path to take was a bit unclear. Would it be redemptive to ignore the situation? To alert officials? To leak secret documents? Which option involves making something positive out of a bad situation? This question is impossible to answer, because each option has its moral contentions. Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether Snowden retained his redemptive abilities through his transformation.

Agency and Communion

Walker and Frimer (2017) posit two ways that agency (quest for power) interacts with communion (desire to benefit the greater good). A person may either use their agency (power/abilities) for communal benefit or they may use their communal actions as a way to gain agency. We can look at Snowden's actions in terms of both scenarios. The first possibility is that Snowden used his agency (computer knowledge and intelligence) to benefit society by informing the public of privacy infractions committed by the NSA. In this case, most people would agree that this is a heroic act because he was using his resources and abilities to benefit others (agency for communion).

The second option is that Snowden used communion (leaking the information to the public) to gain agency (power, resources). This case seems less likely because, as a result of his whistleblowing, Snowden gave up far more than he gained. Snowden was forced to leave his country and family to live in a foreign country where he knew no one, and he also risked extradition and jail time for espionage. He knew that all of these outcomes were a possibility and yet he still chose to act.

Analysis

Snowden exhibited aspects of each of the foundational variables of moral heroism. He did have developmental roots, but these did not seem to be strong enough to keep him from exposing fraud in the careers of his family members. Snowden exhibited redemptive qualities in his early life, but these were called into question when it came to his professional choices. Finally, Snowden seemed to use his agency as a means of communion, which is commonly seen as heroic. Based on this analysis, Snowden did exhibit each of the foundational variables of heroism in some way. However, simply possessing these variables does not automatically mean that someone will become a hero.

SNOWDEN'S (HEROIC?) CAREER

After investigating Snowden's foundational variables, it is important to see how these variables contributed to his heroic and/or villainous transformation. Snowden's main transformation occurred during his time working for the CIA. According to Dik et al (2017), there is a difference between a job, a career, and a calling. A job is simply how you get a paycheck; a career involves achieving promotions; but a calling involves some intrinsic value. People who approach their work as a calling are in a better position for heroism. A "calling" has three dimensions: a summons, purpose and meaning, and social heroism. Was Edward Snowden's career as a computer specialist a calling? And if so, did it lead him toward heroism or villainy?

Summons

A summons can either influence which career path a person chooses, or it can determine which direction a person takes within their career (Dik et al., 2017). For example, a person can feel a summons to become a doctor or a doctor can feel a summons to go abroad and practice in undeveloped countries. In the case of Edward Snowden, his career path was mostly influenced by his family members' involvement with the government and his natural knack for computer skills.

Snowden's "summons" occurred once he had already entered the field of computer technology. As discussed previously, Snowden encountered corruption in his Swiss diplomatic position and found alarming information in the CIA's documents, which he was privy to while working at Dell. These experiences served as his summons to action. During his career as a technical specialist, it seems that Snowden created his own mini-career which involved stealing NSA documents in order to expose the fraud to the public. This, he felt, was the moral thing to do. He likely sensed a summons or call to action that was larger than himself and involved great meaning and purpose.

It is important to note, however, that many times, villains experience a similar summons. Most villains believe that their actions are "right" and moral (Dik et al., 2017). Hitler likely viewed himself as a hero and felt a summons to purge the world and create a superior race. Therefore, Snowden's "calling" does not have to be a call to heroic action. It could, instead, be a call to villainous action.

Meaning and Purpose

Dik et al. (2017) refer to the second dimension of a "calling" as having a greater meaning or purpose in one's life. Snowden likely thought that when he entered the field of computer technology and held job titles such as "systems administrator" and "infrastructure analyst", he would be keeping NSA computer systems running in order to protect our country from threats. One can speculate that this task was likely important to Snowden because of his grandfather's death in the 9/11 terrorist attacks and his interest in joining the army. In contrast to his expectations, Snowden found alarming information about the NSA spying on American citizens. Since his original sense of meaning in his career had been debunked, Snowden found a new motive, or "calling." This calling was to gather as much information as possible about the NSA's illegal activities and expose them to the world. Snowden's new sense of meaning and purpose was to give US citizens the information he felt they deserved about how the NSA monitored their lives.

Social Heroism

The final dimension of a calling is that it is carried out in order to advance the well-being of others; it is not carried out purely for selfish reasons and internal motives.

So, while Snowden may have felt personally cheated by the NSA, he claimed that his greater goal was educating society as a whole with the goal of inspiring a change in the system. It is also possible that his goal was purely personal and that he simply wanted his “15 minutes of fame”. However, this option is less likely since his actions posed such a high personal risk and since he did not ask for money from the journalists with whom he shared the documents.

“I did what I believed right... I did not seek to enrich myself. I did not seek to sell US secrets. I did not partner with any foreign government to guarantee my safety. Instead, I took what I knew to the public, so what affects all of us can be discussed by all of us in the light of day, and I asked the world for justice. That moral decision to tell the public about spying that affects all of us has been costly but it was the right thing to do and I have no regrets.” – Edward Snowden (Scheuerman, 2014)

Analysis

Based on the work by Dik et al. (2017), Edward Snowden’s job working as a computer specialist can be considered a “calling” because it involved a summons, it gave him meaning and purpose, and it had a societal impact. However, while having a job that is also a “calling” puts people in a better position to become a hero, it does not necessarily mean that they will be a hero. In fact, Snowden’s summons could have been a call to villainy, depending on one’s viewpoint. Snowden’s career not only provided opportunities for heroism, but also helped him develop the moral conviction that he needed to take action.

THE MORAL CONVICTION OF EDWARD SNOWDEN

Snowden as a Resister

Resisters are a type of moral hero who engage in risky actions to promote a moral cause (Janoff-Bulman & Bharadwaj, 2017). Resisters recognize some harm being done that is immoral and they take a stand against it. This “harm” does not have to be physical – it can be in the form of discrimination or mistreatment. A resister’s moral conviction is what allows them to accept the risk and take heroic action. People with strong moral convictions believe that there is no “continuum of rightness” – something is either morally right or it is morally wrong, and they believe

that pursuing this moral purpose allows them to disregard majority influence or authorities. These people are very likely to reject authorities when the authorities violate their moral convictions (Janoff-Bulman & Bharadwaj, 2017).

Edward Snowden perfectly fits the model of a resister because he took a stand against what he perceived as immoral actions in the form of NSA surveillance programs. He blatantly rejected authority by breaking the law to steal confidential documents and sharing sensitive information with the public.

Moral Convictions Leading to Heroism

Janoff-Bulman & Bharadwaj (2017) argue that moral heroism does not have to develop in an instant. Instead, it can develop over time much like the foot-in-the-door phenomenon. Edward Snowden's moral heroism developed throughout his career. When Snowden was first exposed to government corruption in Geneva, he felt that it was immoral, but only took a small stand by quitting his job. In his next job with Dell, where he had access to the surveillance plans, Snowden's moral conviction strengthened. This time, he took a bigger step by bringing his concerns to the attention of higher officials at the company. When no action was taken, he became determined to take further resistant steps against the immoral privacy breaches. While in the process of downloading documents as proof, Snowden learned that the head of the NSA had lied under oath to congress about the surveillance programs (Poitras, 2014). At this point, Snowden decided to take the extreme action of leaking the documented proof to the public in order to expose the NSA's immoral actions.

All of the smaller steps of quitting his job or attempting to go through the proper channels with his concerns ultimately led to Snowden's whistleblowing, which is classified as moral heroism in the eyes of many including social scientists such as Franco et al. (2011). However, in the minds of others, Snowden's so-called moral conviction is what propelled him toward villainy.

Moral Convictions leading to Villainy

While moral conviction can help a person stand up to authority to correct a moral wrong, it can also lead to a rejection of the proper rule of law (Janoff-Bulman &

Bharadwaj, 2017). By stealing top secret, classified documents, fleeing the country, and then sharing the documents with the public, Edward Snowden indisputably rejected the proper rule of law. He faces felony charges for violating the Espionage Act and he is “wanted” by the U.S. government (Tavani, 2014). There is no doubt that he is a criminal and that the criminal behavior was a result of his moral convictions. It is unclear, however, whether his actions were warranted based on moral grounds, which are hard to identify objectively.

As much as we would like to believe in universal morals, where everyone agrees on what is right and wrong, this is often not a reality. People have different views about what is right and wrong (Janoff-Bulman & Bharadwaj, 2017). For example, Edward Snowden believed that it was immoral for the U.S. government to invade the privacy of ordinary American citizens who were not suspected of any crime, because it violated their fourth amendment rights. However, other people do not see those actions as immoral because they believe that the government is morally obligated to protect U.S. citizens from terrorism or other threats by any means necessary. This group of people view Edward Snowden as a villain because he overstepped his bounds as a vigilante and broke the law for a cause that they do not identify as a moral issue (Scheuerman, 2014).

Analysis

Janoff-Bulman & Bharadwaj (2017) propose a method of distinguishing moral heroism from moral villainy. The fundamental distinction is whether the action caused harm to others. While Snowden did not directly cause physical harm to any individual person, the document release did cause harm indirectly. As a result of the leak, the U.S. has lost the trust of valued economic partners and critical foreign intelligence information. The Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, stated that as a result of the document leak, terrorist groups are now more careful about how they communicate information via the internet, making them harder to catch. He stated that this puts the lives of thousands of military men and women at risk (Meek et al., 2014). However, we are unable to tell which (if any) military deaths are a direct result of Snowden’s actions. Because of the ambiguity of the harm caused by Snowden’s moral acts, it is not possible to classify him as a moral hero or a moral villain.

Heroic Traits

Allison & Goethals (2011) have compiled the great eight traits of heroism which include the traits of intelligent, strong, reliable, resilient, caring, charismatic, selfless, and inspiring. Each of these great eight traits can be applied to Snowden in some way. He is certainly intelligent because he was identified as a computer wizard and hired to design surveillance programs. He also had the knowledge necessary to extract, encrypt, and comprehend an estimated 1.7 million documents (Poitras, 2014). His strength comes from his bravery and courage to risk his life by leaking the NSA documents. Reporter Glenn Greenwald and filmmaker Laura Poitras found Snowden to be reliable as they worked with him to publish their exposé. He cared about the American public and their right to privacy and he was charismatic and confident in his documentary interviews. Snowden acted selflessly by putting his own life in danger for what he identified as benefitting the greater good. He sacrificed his family, home and freedom to expose what he considered “public issues, not my issues, but everyone’s issues” (Poitras, 2014).

However, it is impossible to know whether Snowden’s actions were entirely selfless. Finally, Snowden inspired others to follow in his footsteps. He hoped that whatever happened to him, others would come after to continue his work. Former Pentagon employee John Crane has fulfilled Snowden’s hope by exposing new information about how the NSA handled whistleblower Thomas Drake’s case in 2002 (Hertsgaard, 2016). All eight traits can be applied to Edward Snowden, showing that he has the traits necessary for heroism. However, many of these same traits are also indicative of a villain (Allison & Goethals, 2011).

Villainous Traits

Eight evil traits have also been identified by Allison & Goethals (2011) and they include: smart, resilient, violent, greedy, mentally ill, immoral, egotistical, and vengeful. We have already classified Snowden as smart and resilient. Snowden is not directly violent since he never caused physical harm, himself. Snowden might be greedy, and have hoped to gain fame and fortune from his actions. While he did gain fame, he did not sell his stolen documents, so he did not acquire fortune.

There has been no psychological examination suggesting that Snowden is mentally ill; however, it cannot be ruled out completely. The debate of immorality is subjective, as we have previously discussed. There is not enough known about Snowden's personal life to say whether he is egotistical; however he has criticized his employers for downplaying his job titles and responsibilities, suggesting that he may be narcissistic. Snowden has not publicly announced vengeance toward a specific party; however, one could speculate that he blames the government for his grandfather's death in 9/11 and sought revenge on the government by exposing corruption in the system.

Analysis

All eight heroic traits were fairly easy to apply to Edward Snowden while the villainous traits were more difficult to attribute to Snowden's character. This difficulty could simply stem from the fact that we do not know enough about Snowden's personal life and true personality traits. The traits that we were able to easily assign to Snowden point more toward a heroic nature than a villainous one.

CAN SNOWDEN'S HEROISM BE OBJECTIVELY DETERMINED?

Psychologists disagree on whether heroism should be defined from an objective or subjective viewpoint. To be able to classify a hero objectively, an objective definition of heroism must be agreed upon. Those in favor of the objective approach have defined heroism as taking exceptional action that benefits the greater good and involves significant risk and sacrifice (Allison, Goethals & Kramer, 2017).

Edward Snowden's actions were exceptional because no one has ever successfully released so many top-secret documents on such a large scale. The content of the documents was also exceptionally startling. Snowden was concerned that the public would not care about the content of the documents – that they would have already expected that some spying was going on and not really cared about the new information. However, this was not the case at all. The public response to the documents was resounding, with thousands of people signing petitions and voicing their concerns to the government (The Courage Foundation, 2016), validating Snowden's actions as exceptional.

Snowden's exposé certainly involved significant risk and sacrifice. By leaking top secret government documents that he stole from the NSA, Snowden put himself in grave danger. The U.S. government charged Snowden with theft, "unauthorized communication of national defense information" and "willful communication of classified communications intelligence information to an unauthorized person" (Tavani, 2014). The last two charges fall under the Espionage Act of 1917 and his sentence could be about 30 years in prison plus a hefty fine. In addition to legal action, Snowden has received a lot of backlash from the public, especially NSA supporters, and he would likely face significant threats to his safety if he returned to the U.S. As a whistleblower, Snowden sacrificed everything that was normal about his life. He was forced to flee the country and never return, leaving behind his family and longtime girlfriend. He also sacrificed a private life free from the public eye. Snowden acknowledged in his many emails and documents that he knew the risk and sacrifices involved with his actions, but that he had to move forward because it was the right thing to do (Greenwald, 2014).

The tenant of the objective heroism definition that people tend to disagree on is whether Snowden's whistleblowing "benefited the greater good". Some argue that the information exposed important information that the American public deserved to know so that they could fight back against the injustice. Others argue that the documents caused more harm than good by putting service men and women at risk and causing international friction (Meek, 2014). Still others advocate that the government should be allowed to use their discretion with surveillance because it is necessary to keep our country safe from terrorists. There can be no conclusion made from these contrasting viewpoints; it is impossible to say who is right or wrong in this debate or whether the benefits of the exposé outweighed the drawbacks. Therefore, although his actions were exceptional and involved great risk and sacrifice, Edward Snowden cannot be classified as an objective hero. The disagreement regarding the benefits of Snowden's actions bring us to the discussion of subjectivity.

Snowden as a Subjective Hero or Villain

Edward Snowden can be subjectively classified as both a hero and a villain. The people who are pro-privacy likely view Snowden as a subjective hero,

while those who are pro-surveillance likely view him as a subjective villain. The line between heroism and villainy can be quite blurred and can depend entirely on the judge's viewpoint. Snowden can be identified subjectively as a hero by the exceptional actions mentioned previously that posed great personal risk and sacrifice. Snowden supporters would argue that his actions benefited the greater good by exposing harmful information and sparking a necessary nation-wide debate about internet privacy.

As mentioned earlier, some of the “evil eight” traits can be applied to Snowden, but not all of them. We cannot say for sure whether Snowden is violent, greedy, mentally ill, immoral, egotistical, or vengeful (although we can speculate). Dictionary.com defines a villain as a cruelly malicious person who is involved in or devoted to wickedness or crime; a scoundrel. Since the United States government had charged Snowden with crimes under the Espionage Act, we can objectively say that he was involved in crime. However, objectively, the attributes of “cruel,” “malicious,” “wicked,” and “scoundrel,” would be difficult to assign to Edward Snowden.

Nevertheless, groups who do not agree with Snowden's actions would likely say that, subjectively, he does meet the villainous criteria and they would argue that Snowden is not a hero because his actions did not benefit the greater good. Quite the contrary, their view is that he exhibited civil disobedience and that his actions harmed the greater good (Scheuerman, 2014). Based on this analysis, we can conclude that, subjectively, Edward Snowden can be categorized as either a subjective hero or a subjective villain. Because both of these options are valid, however, he cannot be classified as an objective hero.

SUMMARY

Edward Snowden's bold actions have sparked great controversy among the American public. Some people herald him as a hero who exposed an immoral wrong and a violation of the fourth amendment. Others condemn him as a criminal traitor who unjustifiably stole classified information and posed great risk to our national security by exposing the information to the public. This chapter has analyzed Edward Snowden in depth in order to discern his status as hero or villain.

First, we recounted Snowden's biographical information and outlined his story in terms of the traditional hero's journey. After his departure from normal childhood, we identified the personal obstacles of his grandfather's death and his army discharge as well as the professional obstacles of moral dilemmas while working for the CIA, Dell, and Booz-Allen Hamilton. His heroic transformation occurred when he became a whistleblower and Snowden's "boon to society" was identified by the public's reaction to the exposé.

To assess Snowden's status of "hero," we analyzed his whistleblowing experience by applying the theories of Walker (2017), Dik et al. (2017), and Janoff-Bulman and Bharadwaj (2017). We were able to identify Edward Snowden's foundations of moral heroism: his family ties, redemption from failures early in life, and use of technical knowledge (agency) to benefit the greater good (communion). These foundational variables suggest that Snowden had the potential to become a hero.

We were also able to classify Snowden's line of work in computer technology as a "calling" instead of simply a job or career, according to Dik et al. (2017). His work involved a "summons" to take action and expose the unjust and it also gave Snowden a meaning and purpose in life. Based on Snowden's interviews about his intentions, it seems like he intended his actions to benefit the greater good, regardless of whether people agree on the actual outcome.

In addition, the theory of Janoff-Bulman and Bharadwaj (2017) offered insight into Snowden's moral convictions. We were able to identify Snowden as a resister and see how his moral conviction developed during his time working on government projects. This analysis also suggested that Snowden's moral convictions led him to break the law, potentially classifying him as a villain. Even after considering the views and opinions of several experts in the field of heroism research, Snowden's status of hero or villain was still unclear. We attempted to fit Snowden's character to the great eight and evil eight traits in order to help with his classification and found that the heroic traits were a better fit for Snowden.

Lastly, we attempted to objectively define Snowden as a hero and failed. Instead, Snowden could only be classified as a hero subjectively. We further found that Snowden could also be subjectively classified as a villain by certain groups, making his "official" status impossible to determine.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Simply put, Edward Snowden shared the truth with the world and doing so cost him his personal freedom (Comerford, 2018). Members of society will probably always disagree on whether Snowden is a hero or a villain. Heroism research suggests that Snowden had the potential to be heroic because of his foundational variables, career calling, and moral convictions. Additionally, his personality traits point toward a more heroic than villainous nature. Yet, Edward Snowden cannot be objectively classified as a hero because there is disagreement over whether his actions benefitted society, regardless of his intentions. Subjectively, Edward Snowden can be called a hero or a villain, depending on one's perspective. After considering all of the details that the NSA knows about you, as presented at the start of this chapter, and bearing in mind the analyses that followed, I ask you, the reader, to reconsider the question: do you think the man who copied and leaked this information is a hero or a villain?

If you are still unsure of your answer, you are not alone. The heroism research we referenced in this chapter have provided a wealth of helpful information to consider when classifying Edward Snowden as a hero or a villain. Yet, even with the guidance of the top researchers in the field, we were unable to come to a definitive conclusion. The field of heroism research is still in a nascent stage and thus leaves many questions unanswered, such as: How can we account for the subjective nature of evaluating the “boon to society” that is necessary for heroism? How much of a role does intention play in a hero or villain's classification? And finally, can we define a term for those who fall into the gray area between heroism and villainy, which would include all of the people discussed in this book? We await answers to these questions from future philosophers and heroism scholars.

“I have been to the darkest corners of the government, and what they fear is light.”

—Edward Snowden

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