

Who is winning the information war: security services or the new disruptive journalists?

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2013/08/20/miranda-snowden-nsa-mi6-who-has-the-power/

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Greenwald and Miranda

Like a lot of people I objected to the [treatment of David Miranda](#) at the hands of the UK security officials and I was worried by the pressure put on The Guardian, as [related by editor Alan Rusbridger](#). But I am not so sure about the Orwellian conspiracy/victim framing of the narrative by some on the open Internet side of things.

I don't disagree with [this excellent piece by Nick Cohen](#), for example, that concludes:

The Miranda affair is proof, if further proof is needed, that we are now stuck in the post-Leveson world where not only journalists but their partners can be detained

and questioned for hours on end. Where police officers feel no need to explain themselves to the public, in whose name they work, and whose taxes pay their salaries.

But I think that might underestimate the power the journalists now have. Likewise, I think [Simon Jenkins](#) may be over-egging it to suggest the UK is now as bad as Putin's Russia. Is it possible to see the Miranda incident as a sign of success for [the new disruptive journalism?](#)

The narrative of increasing totalitarian persecution has a few flaws. Firstly, I think it was entirely reasonable for security forces to question someone linked to security breaches. I just think that doing it under terror laws was wrong, especially as Miranda is part of a journalism team.

I am still a little unsure of the Greenwald/Guardian narrative. I am puzzled by why the team chose to fly Miranda through London at all. I am also unclear as to why the Guardian let security officials smash up their hard-drives without making them go down a legal path.* [Someone with more profound doubts about the Guardian and Greenwald is former Tory MP Louise Mensch – [good piece by her here](#)]

But those are details. Overall, it's clear that US and UK officials, long-tortured by WikiLeaks and Julian Assange, are now losing patience with whistle-blowers and their 'accomplices' in the news media. Whatever the absolute truth of the NSA/PRISM revelations it is clear that the security service are pushing the boundaries on what they can do with new technologies to increase their information and surveillance. They are also seeking to reduce scrutiny by journalists, as [they told Rusbridger](#):

| "You've had your debate. There's no need to write any more."

That in itself may be worrying but it's hardly surprising. That is what they are there for. We would all be very cross if there was an act of terror missed because of inadequate data collection by spooks or if a press leak endangered our safety. But it's also journalism's job to hold these people to account and let the public know the scope of what they are up to. That's what worries me about the Miranda incident.

But before we all sink into a slough of digital dystopian despair it might be worth considering this: is this a sign of the strength, not weakness, of revelatory journalism in the digital age?

[My book on WikiLeaks](#) and news in the networked era didn't judge its overall impact on politics. It's clear that the major revelations on Iraq, Afghanistan and the diplomatic cables had local effects and a more general influence on public opinion, but they didn't change the world. That's probably a good thing. I don't want Julian Assange to have more power than elected governments. But I do argue [in that book](#) that these new forms of 'outsider journalism' when combined with the best of mainstream news media and when they exploit the power of new digital networks, create a communications power that is a serious challenge to authority. It must be, that's why they reacted like they did at Heathrow this week.

Political journalism has always been and always will be a struggle between those who have power and those who seek to expose its workings. I don't know how you measure who's winning at the moment but certainly the rules of engagement are changing because of new technologies and globalisation.

UPDATES:

Alan Rusbridger gave an interesting interview to the [BBC's World At One](#) where he tried to clear up some detail. He seemed to say that they smashed the hard drives rather than face a lengthy and expensive legal battle that would have distracted from the process of publication.

Here is lefty lawyer David Green's [take on the legal aspects](#)

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