

The Ethical Resister's Last Resort: News Coverage over the Allegations of a National
Security Whistleblower

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	ii
List of Figures and Charts.....	iv
Chapter	
1. Introduction.....	1
2. Literature Review.....	4
3. Methods.....	18
4. Counter-Hegemonic Narrative.....	35
5. Becoming a Whistleblower: News Representations of Edmonds' Allegations.....	44
6. Findings and Discussion.....	102
7. Conclusion.....	114
Appendix	
1. Bibliography.....	120
2. References for News Articles in Data Set.....	124

LIST OF FIGURES AND CHARTS

Figure	Page
1. Dimensions of Attribution.....	25
2. Graph 1: Frequency of News Items in Major Media Outlets from 2002 to 2009, Divided by US-Based News Organizations and Non-US-Based News Organizations.....	46
3. Graph 2: Frequency of News Items in Major Media Outlets from 2002 to 2009, Divided by Framing Categories.....	50
4. Graph 3: Frequency of News Items in Major Media Outlets from 2002 to 2009, Divided by Targets of Attribution.....	51

Whistleblowers can be seen as individuals fighting for what they believe is right, but their fortitude to expose fraud, waste, abuse, corruption, and injustice “cannot be understood only as an act of individual courage” (Glazer 1989, 167). A whistleblower claim goes nowhere without inside collaborators, outside authorities, legislators, public-interest groups, and courts but ultimately the most important partner in the struggle is often the news media. Obviously, without news media coverage, whistleblowers have little impact. “The willingness of journalists to listen, evaluate, and publicize allegations of wrongdoing is often a central component in facilitating whistleblowing” (167). Without the media, the public is unlikely to ever hear their voices.

We depend on the news media to convey the allegations of whistleblowers or “ethical resisters,” especially when they face tough resistance from inside the organizations for which they work (or in many cases after the whistleblowing process had started, *formerly* worked) as well as resistance from government agencies charged with maintaining accountability. When whistleblowers meet inaction and even retaliation as they attempt to get problems addressed through inside channels and outside authorities, often their last option is to “go public” by telling their stories to journalists (Glazer 1989).

It is reasonable to expect that a whistleblower’s claims would be covered up and distorted within the same organization that they criticize. Some of us may even expect resistance from regulatory agencies or Congress when their criticism is politically inconvenient. However, at the same time we might also rest assured knowing that the news media is there to provide a forum for any credible whistleblower who offers a juicy tale of corporate crime or government corruption.

On the surface, it appears that whistleblowers may always rely on the media when other channels run dry. Relative to the difficulties faced by political outsiders who attempt to broadcast unpopular or politically inconvenient messages in the news media, whistleblowers appear to have the ability to bypass these constraints by virtue of their unique position as insiders. The sheer number of news stories based on the allegations of whistleblowers should give some indication of their success. Daniel Ellsberg who leaked the Pentagon Papers, Sherron Watkins of Enron, Colleen Rowley of the FBI, and Katherine Gunn of the British Government Communications Headquarters are just a few examples of whistleblowers who brought stories of government and corporate deviance to the light of public scrutiny. The news stories resulting from frustrated corporate and government workers are often cited as examples of the kind of hard-hitting watchdog journalism that is supposed to put a check on power. When things get tough, the whistleblower always has the news media as their ace in the hole. Or do they? When covering whistleblowers, do media bark and growl as watchdogs guarding the public interest, or do they simply perform tricks that distract public attention away from the real sources of crime and corruption in government and corporate organizations?

Clearly, whistleblowers can get attention from the news media, but the extent to which they are able to get allegations of organizational deviance faithfully represented is not so evident. Even while recognizing the large number of news stories centering on the claims of whistleblowers and the impact those stories have had on political conflict, the question still remains as to how those stories are told. Sociologist Suzan Marx (2006) argued that news media do not always serve as an effective outlet for whistleblowers' allegations. She stressed that whistleblowers must be wary of bringing their cases to

journalists, stating that the whistleblower “must realize that when he/she selects the media as his/her whistleblowing channel of choice, the media could very well run away with the allegations” (13). She warned that there “is always a real threat that the whistleblower could become a puppet of the publicity forces at work during the process” (3). Although news media may give “positive” coverage to a whistleblower, Marx pointed out that “we know from experience that positive media coverage does not necessarily guarantee a positive outcome for the whistleblower” (3).

What is missing from Marx’s warning is any elaboration about what kinds of whistleblower allegations are most likely to be ignored or distorted. Under what conditions news media run away with allegations is a question worth investigating. A framework for predicting how and when whistleblower claims are misrepresented in the news media remains sketchy at best.

For the sake of whistleblowers themselves as they put their career and possibly their life on the line, and for the sake of a healthy political system, we ought not simply assume that news media will always publicize the claims of whistleblowers. At the same time, we should not assume that news media will ignore or distort all the claims of all whistleblowers all of the time. Considering the importance of news coverage for whistleblowers and the centrality of this coverage for substantive democratic governance, this paper investigates how news media cover the allegations of national security whistleblowers.

Qualitative content analysis is used to analyze how major news media represented the allegations of Sibel Edmonds, an FBI whistleblower who was fired and eventually bound by a gag order petitioned for by the Justice Department to keep her silent about

what she claimed was evidence of systemic criminal activities within the US government. An analysis of this case can indicate how the corporate news system may represent the allegations of other national security whistleblowers, further refining media theory as it relates to whistleblowers specifically and helping whistleblowers prepare themselves as they approach the news media. In line with hegemony and indexing theory, findings suggest that mainstream news media are likely to avoid covering allegations of institutional iniquities, even if such allegations fulfill professional standards of “newsworthiness” and even if these allegations are emphasized by whistleblowers as they speak to journalists. As national security whistleblowers prepare to engage the news media in the process of making their allegations public, they should be aware that allegations they make about injustices occurring at the systemic level will likely be ignored or distorted.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite the recognition of the news media as a vital channel through which the most suppressed whistleblowers must rely (Glazer, 1989), research on whistleblowers leaves questions about how their allegations are handled in the media largely unexplored. Most social science research focuses on the factors that give rise to whistleblowing (Anderson, 1980; Glazer, 1989), the personal consequences of whistleblowing (Glazer, 1989; Alford, 2001) or the characteristics of organizations that are responsive to whistleblowing (Davis, 1989; Barnett, 1992; Johnson, 2003). While the relationship between whistleblowers and reporters is recognized as vital to the whistleblowing

process, little attention is actually paid to how media represent and investigate their allegations. If news media are seen as a last resort for whistleblowers after they have exhausted other channels, it is worth taking a closer look to assess how major media actually cover whistleblowers.

Social science literature on whistleblowing specifically does not indicate much about how whistleblowers' allegations are likely to be covered, but much research and speculation has been carried out more generally about how the news media cover issues. This literature review examines both popular and scholarly perspectives about news media selection and representation that may help indicate how whistleblowers' stories are likely to be represented and what factors help explain such coverage.

Orchestrated Propaganda Model

One perspective that has little currency in societies where "freedom of the press" is a dominant value, but is still worth mentioning is the idea that news media is directly influenced through overt censorship, either by government agencies or powerful groups. Such a model applies in many countries that do not have constitutional separations between the press and the state. In democratic societies such as the United States, the idea that the government directly intervenes in how news organizations select and package news has little merit. There are instances when US government agencies have requested the omission of certain information in news but there is little evidence of any systematic use of coercive tactics.

Another approach to this model sometimes applied in popular culture to contexts where state control of news is not overtly institutionalized is the conception of the news

media as agents of social control working in cooperation with powerful groups perhaps including but not limited to the state. Large corporations or powerful secret societies such as the Illuminati or Bildeburgers are thought to control news content. This kind of control would require large-scale conspiracies involving editors and news managers but not necessarily journalists themselves in order to keep it a secret. Accounts of information control following this model include no elucidation of how such control happens in practice. Again, there is a lack of evidence to support such claims but through the logic of conspiracy theory this lack of evidence is purported to be yet another demonstration of such control of information in operation.

Professional Standards and Ethics as Determinants of News Coverage

In places where “freedom of the press” is held as a necessary principle of democratic governance, professional standards and ethics are often seen as the main factors deciding what is included in the news and how it is presented. Many journalists and editors contend that professional standards, based on the public interest, determine which stories are presented and how those stories are framed (Kudlac, 2007; Gans, 1979: 78-80). This perspective is based on the assumption that journalists are independent professionals free from external pressures other than laws. While this view does not necessarily imply that news media mirror objective reality, it suggests that news professionals are able to get as close as reasonably possible by following a set of impartial rules (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). A variety of professional codes exist that are held by news workers and taught in journalism schools, but most share common elements including fairness, accuracy, balance, public accountability, and objectivity.

The exact criteria used to determine what is newsworthy also vary slightly depending on who is asked, but these criteria are usually very similar. Gitlin (1980) stated: “Ask a reporter what is news and one is likely to elicit vague references to “what is important” or “what is interesting” or “what is new” (p. 268). A number of media advocacy and public relations firms suggest that the criteria for newsworthiness be kept in mind while groups engage the media as they attempt to gain attention for whatever issue or problem. The criteria listed usually include things such as timeliness (what is “new” is news), geographical proximity of the event to the audience, number of people affected, consequence and future impact, unusualness or shock value, extent of conflict, prominence or celebrity of people involved, the public’s need to know, and visibility or relevance to ongoing issues.

Shoemaker (2006) reduces these criteria of newsworthiness down into two constructs: deviance and social significance. Three dimensions comprise the construct of deviance: statistical deviance (how unusual the event is), social change deviance (how a news event holds the potential to change the status-quo), and normative deviance (how a news event breaks laws or rules of a society). Four dimensions comprise social significance: political significance (impact on a governmental system or international relations), economic significance (impact related to market issues), cultural significance (how an event is related to social norms or traditions), and public significance (how a news event affects the public’s well-being). Shoemaker and her colleagues (1996, 2006) as well as Hong (2008) contend that these criteria are strong predictors for what news items are selected for publication and the amount of coverage they receive.

In the case of coverage over whistleblowers, the ethical consideration of limitation of harm may also be considered quite relevant. This often involves omitting information that could harm someone's reputation or give away sensitive information that could harm national security. Whistleblowers working inside the national security apparatus often run the risk of divulging information about ongoing investigations or methods of intelligence gathering, and so news organizations must navigate these issues carefully. The credibility of a whistleblower and the validity of their claims also must be established so that a news organization does not commit libel against individuals caught in a whistleblower's web of accusations.

Scholars of communications and public relations often conclude that "newsworthiness" determines what we see in the news, but many sociologists disagree. Gans (1979) argues that professional standards play a role, but are not final determinants of the finished news product. Reisner (1990, 1998) concluded that news values are weak predictors and Berkowitz (1990) found that criteria of newsworthiness could only explain 19.4 percent of the variance in outcome of the final news product.

The Market Model

In Western capitalist societies, "freedom of the press" exists in the context of the "free market." As a market-oriented industry, news media must sell their product to audiences as well as advertising space to other companies. Whether they ultimately answer to the demands of audiences or advertisers, the capitalist imperative is to expand readership or viewership in order to generate income from the audience and/or increase advertising profits.

While some journalists insist that professional standards of newsworthiness determine the content of news, a few journalists unabashedly proclaim that market forces play a key role in selecting what is included in the news and how stories are shaped (Kudlac 2007). This perception of news media is popular among media critics who focus upon news organizations' motivation to sell news as a product for mass consumption, leading to an overabundance of sensationalism at the cost of quality information and relevancy (Chermak, 1995; Duwe, 2000; Prichard & Hughes, 1997). From this perspective, news organizations base their decisions on perceptions of what is most likely to resonate with the general public and therefore sell news. This process has been referred to as market-driven journalism by McManus (1994). The implication of this drive to give the audience what they want (or what news organizations perceive the public as wanting), the "news production process becomes characterized as an exercise in market strategy rather than a presentation of an accurate summary of local, national, and world events." (Buckler 2005). Journalist Bonnie Anderson (2004) referred to this state of news coverage as "infotainment," lamenting the preponderance of news that is designed to be marketable rather than news designed to inform. This perspective assumes that audiences want to see sensational, entertaining news or at least news organizations expect that audiences want to see such news.

From a market perspective, while news organizations attempt to maximize profits through increasing customers and advertising revenue, the flip-side is that they also must attempt to keep the costs of production low. This can lead to reporting favoring low-cost production of stories, as opposed to approaches that require more resources such as investigative journalism. Expediency is also a predictable result of market-driven

journalism, leading toward the production of news by one outlet that essentially copies news in other media outlets. The competitive nature of the market system, however, would provide some imperative to create original news pieces. In sum, this perspective emphasizes the drive for sensationalism by market-oriented news organizations.

Political Partisanship

The professional standards model and the market model do not predict any political bias in the news. Instead, they focus upon politically neutral factors of professional values and ethics or sensationalism as determinants of content. Nevertheless, popular notions abound around the idea that the mainstream news system in the United States is systematically skewed toward the political Right or Left. The news media are accused of having a liberal bias by some and a conservative bias by others.

Accuracy in Media (AIM) is one group that claims the news media are slanted toward favoring a liberal viewpoint. Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) contends that it is the other way around. Both sides offer an array of studies to back up their claims. In the book *The Media Elite* (1986) by Linda Lichter, Robert Lichter, and Stanley Rothman, the news system in the US is claimed to be oriented toward a liberal bias. The authors contend that most journalists in American news media favor liberal viewpoints and reflect these viewpoints in coverage of controversial issues. Puglisi analyzed New York Times editorials between 1946 and 1997, finding that the newspaper leaned toward Democratic partisanship. In a search of studies on the question of liberal or conservative bias, most favor the viewpoint that news in the United States is slanted toward liberal viewpoints, implying that conservatives are at a disadvantage. However,

other research suggests that the relationship between news coverage and political power is much more complicated than a matter of either liberal or conservative bias.

Hegemony Model

The final perspective on the news discussed here takes elements from the market model and professional standards model, but adds an ideological component that predicts news content as favoring a certain political slant. This political slant, however, is not characterized as either Democrat or Republic, or liberal or conservative. Rather than conceptualizing market forces and professional standards as politically neutral it incorporates these, along with organizational routines, as ideologically rooted forces through which propaganda operates to “filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public” (Chomsky, 1988, p. 2).

This hegemonic model is rooted in a perspective on power that views culture as sustaining inequalities. The term “hegemony” was coined by Antonio Gramsci (1971), who viewed the failure of working classes to revolt as a product of ruling class domination over prevailing ideologies and everyday beliefs. Unlike pluralism in which no particular perspective or system of thought holds unequal and enduring power, a state of hegemony is characterized by mass culture serving as a stage for elite values, norms, and definitions to dominate beliefs to the extent that they are seen as natural.

While liberal or conservative viewpoints may be more or less common in a hegemonic news system, viewpoints put forward in the news do not transgress boundaries limited by elite principles. According to hegemonic model of news

production, diversity can be apparent within the political system, but this diversity is limited by widely accepted beliefs and routines forming an underlying system of domination. A hegemonic news media may present what can be argued as “diverse” views, or even present views highly skewed toward liberal or conservative political positions, but the extent of diversity or tendency toward liberal or conservative positions are contained by dominant hegemonic principles. The apparent diversity does not reflect anything approaching a full range of viewpoints, especially those held by marginalized groups. In a hegemonic news system, representations will predictably exclude constructions of reality that would threaten elite power. Gitlin’s (1980) analysis of news media representation indicates where the boundaries of discourse are often set within the news media:

“The news routines are skewed toward representing demands, individuals, and frames which do not fundamentally contradict *the dominant hegemonic principles: the legitimacy of private control of commodity production; the legitimacy of the national security State; the legitimacy of technocratic experts; the right and ability of authorized agencies to manage conflict and make the necessary reforms; the legitimacy of the social order secured and defined by the dominant elites; and the value of individualism as the measure of social existence*” (p. 270).

So, rather than exhibiting a liberal or conservative bias, the news system is regarded as exhibiting an elite bias. In this way, the news system serves a propaganda function similar to the orchestrated propaganda model in its outcome, but operates in a much more subtle and complex ways. Elite versions of events and issues are privileged in this system, but the processes for such “censorship” do not resemble the kind of information control at work in news systems that are directly controlled by authoritarian regimes or imaginary conspiratorial networks. In contrast to popular notions of direct

control and repression by government, of which there is little evidence to support in the US, Chomsky and Herman (1988) characterize the system of elite dominance as one that appears to “occur[] so naturally that media news people, frequently operating with complete integrity and goodwill, are able to convince themselves that they choose and interpret the news ‘objectively’... “ (p. 2). Rather than submitting to external pressures, news organizations follow their own internalized norms that result in what is effectively propaganda.

In contrast to narrow emphases about the importance of professional standards of “newsworthiness” or the more cynical view stressing market forces in determining what is presented in the news and how issues are framed, Chomsky and Herman combine these and more to identify five filters that influence what we see, hear, and read in the news. These five filters are: ownership of the medium, the medium’s funding sources, the sources that news organizations rely upon, flak from government and interest groups that news organizations face, and finally prevailing ideology. The hegemonic model suggests that propaganda is an outcome of the way the news system is structured, but unlike the orchestrated propaganda model it actually accounts for how elite control actually operates.

Professional values in journalism are often seen as mechanisms that ensure independence of news presentations from the interests of dominant power groups, but the hegemonic perspective situates these values as instruments of hegemony rather than protectors of independence. The cornerstone of professional news values taught to journalism students and espoused by reporters and audiences alike is the ideal of objectivity. In the face of the viewpoint that the pursuit of objectivity in news assures

fairness between competing perspectives, advocates of the hegemony model argue that in practice dominant claims are presented as “objective” because they are less likely to be marked as controversial (Chomsky, 1988; Bennett, 1995, 1993). Frames based on conventional assumptions can be conveyed in news reports without any explanation because they are familiar to audiences, thus easily accepted as “objective” and taken for granted as natural. On the other hand the claims and views of political outsiders need more extensive explanation, and so are less likely to pass both journalists’ and audiences’ perceptions as features of “objective” positions. Bennet (1983) argues that the journalistic standard of “objectivity” supports such hegemony in the news. “American journalism may have become trapped within an unworkable set of professional standards, with the result that the more objective or fair reporters try to be, the more official, (and other) biases they introduce into the news” (163).

Market forces are recognized as important factors determining the content and character of news, but unlike the market model that contends news organizations simply “give the people what they want,” the hegemonic model goes beyond criticism aimed narrowly at the drive for sensationalism. Sensationalism itself does not systematically favor any political position or ideology, and so the market model does not predict anything other than the stupefying effects of dramatic “infotainment.” However, underlying market imperatives and the news routines geared toward fulfilling them are not regarded as politically neutral in the hegemonic model. The hegemonic model regards the news market more as a “guided market system” (Chomsky, 1988: xii) comprised of a system of news-gathering routines which favor the perspectives of those in power.

One important example of news-gathering routines that favor the status quo is reliance on official sources, a practice rooted in both professional news standards as well as market imperatives. “Indexing” (Bennet, 1990) refers to the tendency for news organizations to present perspectives based upon the views expressed by established leaders and powerful groups. Since news routines demand reliance on official sources, this theory emphasizes the importance of contention among elites for predicting whether news will present a challenge to the official presidential administration frame. In other words, for any perspective to be put forward in the news, it needs advocates who are political insiders. Without opposition by at least one group of elites against another, a frame countering official versions of events or issues is unlikely to develop. A grassroots movement alone is probably not enough to get “positive” coverage for a particular viewpoint. A politician or established interest group must take up the cause.

Indexing helps explain how some outsider claims can at times enter the news, proposing that they can do so only when they do not challenge central elite interests. Indexing predicts that news media will disregard claims for which no elite opposition is interested in promoting. According to this view, journalists index competing viewpoints in relation to the degree of conflict among powerful officials who serve as routine sources. Bennett’s (1995) statement summarizes the argument: “most political news still originates from government officials themselves” (124). Such coverage is often simply “a result of news organizations reporting views critical of government policies *after* those policies were attacked by powerful figures in Washington” (163). In this way the indexing process virtually guarantees elite control of the news.

One might dismiss hegemony theory on the basis of the ubiquitous existence of scandals in the news involving leading politicians and corporate executives. However, some argue that scandals can operate as a kind of purification ritual that rids the system of “corrupt” individuals and symbolically reaffirms the legitimacy of institutions that may be structured in a way as to make such corruption almost inevitable. Bennett argues that “Even Watergate, long regarded as the model of modern investigative reporting, stopped short of challenging the authority of government or pushing too far into institutional failings, such as exposing flaws in the secrecy and espionage systems that may have contributed to presidential abuses of power. For the most part, the press pack settled, instead, for the limits on these areas of inquiry that were established by public congressional investigations and ultimately pronounced the normalizing conclusions that ‘the system worked’” (203). Similar findings of the “bad apple syndrome” of zeroing in on individual corruption in political scandals have been arrived at on research into the Iran-Contra affair (Cavender et al, 1993), and torture at Abu Ghraib (Bennett et al, 2006). In reference to coverage on the Watergate scandal, Bennett (1995) concludes that “...in retrospect it seems that the news exonerated a system containing the institutional weaknesses that permitted the abuses of power to occur in the first place” (204).

Rather than direct control by a state apparatus, the hegemonic model contends that news organizations are controlled through organizational imperatives and internalized norms. In contrast to views that attribute critical press coverage to “liberal or crusading journalists” or views that stress direct government control of news, the hegemonic model emphasizes both professional news values and organizational imperatives as underlying factors that skew news toward elite viewpoints. Market forces

and professional standards are not regarded as politically neutral factors, but instead conceptualized as features of the journalism establishment that systematically favor elite viewpoints.

Event Driven News and the Cascading Activation Model

Many media analysts argue that the pattern of favor for elite interests is not without exception. At times, stories are presented in the news that can be seen as a challenge to hegemonic principles. The theory of event-driven news (Molotch, 1974) helps explain one kind of deviation from what the hegemonic propaganda model of news reporting would predict. Sometimes, noteworthy events take place that challenge dominant frameworks or official accounts. For example, the September 11 attack soon brought the question of “why did they do it?” or “why do they hate us?” into public discourse. The question was threatening to political elites because it could lead to a critical evaluation of US foreign policy. According to a pure hegemonic model, such an assessment of US foreign policy is unlikely to enter the news but in the coverage immediately following the attack, the foreign policy context was brought to light in several instances. This deviation from the norm of elite representation can be explained by the theory of event-driven news, in which counter-hegemonic frames sometimes enter the news due to sudden events to which elites have little time to formulate and transmit an interpretation.

The theory of event-driven news does not necessarily conflict with the hegemony model and the theory of indexing. Robert Entman (2004) modified the indexing approach into a “cascading activation model” that uses the metaphor of a waterfall to describe both the power of elites to shape the news, but also the occasional power of

news organizations themselves and the public to influence how media frames spread throughout a hierarchy. At the top of the waterfall is the White House, Department of Defense, and Department of State, from where frames “cascade” down the ladder to non-administration elites, news organizations, their texts, and on the public. In this way, it is much like the hegemony approach and like indexing, this model predicts that journalists are more likely to promote counterframes when there is elite discord. However, the “cascading activation model” also allows for news frames to spread upwards, like salmon struggling upriver. These instances depend on circumstances in which counterframes are more likely to spread upward, such as when a preponderance of midlevel sources (such as whistleblowers) promote counterframes and when undeniable public events present obvious cultural contradictions.

METHODS

This study aims to explore how whistleblowers are treated in the news. Some specific questions guiding the research are which elements of allegations set forth by national security whistleblowers are likely to be emphasized and what factors influence such coverage. Suzan Marx contends that whistleblowers must be wary of news media because they are likely to distort their claims, but she did not go further to outline how or when their claims are likely to be distorted, and why. In order to fill these gaps, I will use the method of Ethnographic Content Analysis developed by David Altheide (1996). This method, also referred to as Qualitative Document Analysis, is defined as “the reflexive analysis of documents” (14). Basically, it is ethnographic methods applied to the analysis

of texts. “Products of social interaction, for example, can also be studied reflexively, looking at one feature in the context of what is understood about other features, allowing for the constant comparison suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967)” (14). ECA is similar to grounded theory in that constant comparison and contrasts are central, but ECA differs in that grounded theory emphasizes systematic coding of field notes while ECA is “more oriented to concept development, data collection, and emergent data analysis” (17). The ECA approach involves a focus of the study, but not necessarily a hypothesis. For example, as Altheide applied this method to an analysis of news coverage of the Iranian hostage crisis by approaching the data with a background of concepts and theories in order to “describe the news coverage but in a theoretically informed manner, which in turn would provide the data necessary for further conceptual refinement.” Similarly, I aim to describe news coverage of whistleblower Sibel Edmonds based on a theoretical background open to conceptual refinement.

Media and the Social Construction of Reality

An underlying assumption of this study conceives the news media as an institution that actively and subjectively constructs reality rather than something that passively and objectively mirrors reality. News media are crucial players in the process of the “social construction of reality” (Berger, 1967) and therefore play a role in how people interpret problems and formulate solutions. According to this view knowledge is a dynamic socially created product conditioned through personal experience and culture, conflicting with the tradition of logical empiricism in which knowledge is grounded in

objective reality. In sum, news media do not reflect objective reality but actually reflect subjective society.

Empirical research suggests that news media have a powerful effect on public perceptions, as is demonstrated in studies supporting the theory of agenda setting. Agenda setting, also known as priming, is a theory that news organizations determine what issues the public thinks are important through the amount of attention particular issues are given in media coverage. The idea is often traced to Walter Lippman (1922), who suggested that the media influence the “picture in our heads.” Max McCombs and Donald Shaw (1972) set forth the theory in a study of media effects over the 1968 presidential campaign. They asked 100 undecided voters to make a ranking of the most important issues and then compared the results with the actual amount of coverage given issues in the news media. Just as the authors expected, the rankings were almost the same. Later, researchers carried out studies that suggested media production and public opinion were highly correlated, but went further to establish public opinion as a product, rather than a determinant, of mass media content (Iyengar, 1982, 1984). In sum, the more something is in the news, the more people are concerned about it - not the other way around.

News media play a powerful role in setting the public agenda in regards to which issues are seen as the most significant, but how those particular issues are presented is a further matter. For example, while a social actor may be quite successful garnering media attention for a specific issue, they may be unsuccessful getting news media to tell the story in a way that encompasses their interpretation of the cause of the problem and related solutions. Quantitative studies on agenda setting can indicate success or failure at

getting certain issues into the news but cannot answer questions concerning how those issues are presented.

Assessments of “positive” or “negative” coverage of claims-makers can go only so far in determining how a story is presented, so perhaps the most useful tool in the study of how the news media forms the “picture in our heads” is the concept of framing. Media framing is “to select some aspect of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or recommendation” (Entman, 1993). Gitlin (1980) defines media frames as the “persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis, and exclusion, by which symbol handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual” (7). Gitlin points out that “Even within a given event there is an infinity of noticeable details” (6). Framing, he says, are “principles of selection, emphasis, and presentation composed of little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters” (6). To interpret events and trends that affect our lives personally but take place far away, we must rely on media frames. The fact that media must inevitably choose a particular “frame” (Ferree 2002, Gamson 1992) makes the ideal of objectivity quite problematic. By presenting a news story that unavoidably relies on the selection of certain facts over others while calling it objective, some journalists may unintentionally mislead the audience toward accepting subjective understandings of events as absolute truth (Bennet, 1995).

Injustic Frames

Before going further, it is important to closely consider what concerns guide the study in order to construct a theoretically and practically relevant framework of analysis. As a factor that can influence whether social change action occurs as well as shape a movement, William Gamson's (1992) discussion of injustice frames leads me to pay particular attention to how whistleblowers' allegations are characterized in terms of moral attribution and social level attribution.

Gamson outlines the importance of injustice frames as a component of collective action frames (Snow and Benford, 1992) that motivate people to take part in social movements - the "action oriented sets of beliefs and meanings that inspire and legitimate social movement activities and campaigns." He draws upon Barrington Moore's (1978) *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt* to argue that for collective action to occur, people must first perceive their situation as unjust. That seems quite obvious, but Gamson contends that the development of perceptions of injustice is more complex than it may seem on the surface. "Most contemporary analysts treat it as no simple matter to explain how the indignities of daily life are sometimes transformed into a shared grievance with a focused target of collective action" (31). Inequities can be perceived in a variety of ways that lead to differing emotions, such as cynicism or resignation but "injustice focuses on the righteous anger that puts fire in the belly and iron in the soul" (32). It is a "hot cognition" and not a mere "abstract intellectual judgment about what is equitable" (32). Injustice frames require the perception that harm and suffering are not natural, caused by accident, or just plain inevitable but rather rooted in intentional action

or irresponsible inaction in which this harm and suffering is a foreseeable outcome. This is the moral component of injustice frames.

Moral indignation is one aspect of injustice frames, but what makes the concept much more complex is when we begin to consider who or what is targeted as the key actor in bringing about harm and suffering. This is why Gamson (1992) argues that “competition over defining targets is a crucial battleground in the development or containment of injustice frames” (32). When injustice is rooted within social institutions, blaming individuals can end up diverting attention away from any significant target of collective action. Gamson contends that “as long as moral indignation is narrowly focused on human actors without regard to the broader structure in which they operate, injustice frames will be a poor tool for collective action, leading to ineffectiveness and frustration, perhaps creating new victims of injustice” (33). He argues that “the personalization of responsibility may have the effect of blurring broader power relations and the structural causes of a bad situation” (34). So while harm and suffering rooted at the structural level may be characterized as injustice, if individuals rather than institutions are depicted as the locus of these social ills then effective social change action is unlikely to occur. Individuals may be targeted as scapegoats for structural level problems caused by social irresponsibility. Moral indignation may be the key for sparking motivation for social action, but whether movements work toward systemic social change is largely dependent on the social level of attribution.

Coding Scheme

Based on this conceptualization of injustice frames, I propose a way of looking at how a whistleblower's allegations are selected and represented in the news media. Two dimensions make up this framework of analysis: moral attribution and social level attribution.

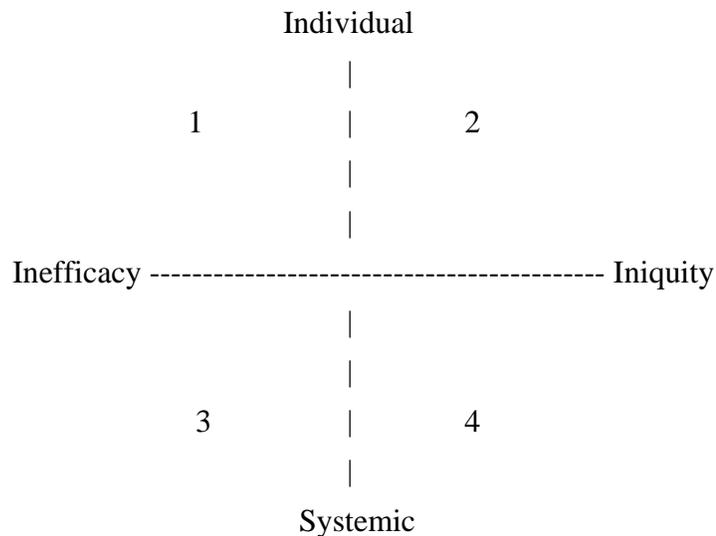
On the dimension of moral attribution, allegations can be represented in terms of inefficacy to iniquity. Inefficacy suggests an acceptance of stated or assumed goals. There is only judgment of the ability of a social entity, whether that entity is an individual or an organization, to reach these goals. For example, a corporate executive characterized as a bumbling idiot not able to preserve the life savings of low-level workers or a government regulatory agency portrayed as not being able to effectively contain environmental pollution due to structural inefficiencies would fall toward the side of inefficacy on the scale of moral attribution. In cases when problems are portrayed in terms of inefficacy, injustice frames are unlikely to develop because whatever harm and suffering under consideration was not brought about by deliberate action in the pursuit of widely objectionable goals.

Iniquity, on the other hand, suggests a judgment of the goals themselves rather than criticism aimed at the ability of an actor to reach those goals. For example, a corporate executive characterized as taking part in criminal activities aimed at stealing from shareholders or a government regulatory agency portrayed as not being able to effectively contain environmental pollution due to willful negligence for the sake of political alliances with polluters would fall toward the side of iniquity on the scale of moral attribution. In cases where problems are portrayed in terms of iniquity, injustice

frames are more likely to develop because whatever harm and suffering under consideration was brought about by deliberate action in the pursuit of widely objectionable goals.

On the dimension of social level attribution, problems can be characterized as emanating from individual actors all the way to social systems. The combination of the social level attribution dimension and the moral level attribution dimension creates a coding scheme with four general possibilities: individual inefficacy, individual iniquity, systemic inefficacy, and systemic iniquity.

Figure 1: Dimensions of Attribution



1: Individual Inefficacy

The individual inefficacy frame portrays allegations as aimed at individual problems and not systemic problems. In addition, those individuals who are blamed within this frame

are characterized as bungling, incompetent, or untrained; but not as crooks or villains. In short, the individual inefficacy frame faults well-intentioned individuals. Their abilities are questioned, but not their motives.

2: Individual Iniquity

Like the individual inefficacy frame, the individual iniquity frame of course portrays allegations as aimed at individuals but differs in that these individuals are characterized as possibly malevolent. These are the “bad apples” often portrayed in corporate and political scandals. Their abilities are not necessarily questioned, but their motives are.

3: Systemic Inefficacy

In contrast to the first two frames, the systemic inefficacy frame emphasizes claims about systemic problems rather than problems at the individual level. In this frame the institution or system in question is characterized as benign. Neither the stated nor the underlying aims of the social entity are questioned. Institutional aims are accepted as legitimate and so disappear within the fabric of the story. The problem is identified as the inability of the entity to reach those aims. Examples include organizational dysfunction and systemic inefficiencies. The “abilities” of the system is questioned, but not the aims.

4: Systemic Iniquity

The fourth and final frame identifies problems at the systemic level while questioning the legitimacy of the social entity in question. In stories that highlight this frame, systemic

injustices are emphasized. In contrast to individual iniquity, systemic iniquity does not necessarily imply that individuals comprising whatever institution in question are malicious. However, it does suggest that general humanistic principles are violated. Systemic iniquity is analogous to the concept of “organizational deviance” outlined by David Erman and Richard Lundman (1978). Organizational deviance is action attributed to an organization that transgresses normative expectations. The four conditions necessary for something to be called “organizational deviance” is: first, the “action must be contrary to norms maintained by actors external to the subject organization”; second, “the action must find support in the norms of a given level or division of the organization”; third, “the action must be known to and supported by the dominant administrative coalition of the organization”; and fourth, “it is necessary that socialization of new members include inculcation of norms and rationalizations supportive of such an action” (57-58). In this frame, the “abilities” of a system to reach its goals are not questioned. Instead, it is those very goals or institutional imperatives that are questioned. The motivations of power groups that have the ability to make systemic changes may also be questioned. It is this frame that would not be expected in a hegemonic news system.

Case Selection

Because coverage of potential frames rather than coverage of different whistleblowers are being compared, only one whistleblower case will be chosen for analysis in order to hold as many factors as possible constant. I aimed to choose a whistleblower who put forward a range of claims to aid in so that the “raw materials” of allegations would cover the full spectrum of dimensions of social level of attribution and

moral attribution. It would make little sense to choose a whistleblower case that excluded any mention of systemic attribution, for example.

The specific case analyzed here is the coverage generated by FBI whistleblower Sibel Edmonds. Sibel Edmonds was an FBI contractor with a top-secret security clearance who worked translating surveillance records of counter-intelligence targets. What she considered her core allegations was her discovery of high-level government officials involved with these targets in a criminal network dealing in money laundering, arms smuggling, drug dealing, terrorism, and black market nuclear technology. She presented an unambiguous picture of systemic criminal activity in government, going far beyond accusing government officials of mere incompetence to outright criminal activity. Moreover, she raised concerns that went beyond the criminal activity of individual government officials to the criminal activity of government institutions.

One reason for selecting this case is that Edmonds made many allegations that could be framed in many ways, encompassing all of the dimensions of social level attribution and moral attribution. In other words, she provided the widest range of “raw materials” for an analysis to see which aspects of her claims were emphasized in the framing process. For the dimension of social level attribution, she made allegations that targeted entities spanning the entire spectrum, from individuals to institutions. Blame was directed at people at the individual level, from low-level translators operating in her department to high-level officials and all the way to the system level of the national security establishment as a whole. She also made allegations that spanned the full spectrum of moral attribution from inefficacy to iniquity. Individuals and institutions were alleged to have carried out activities that reflected incompetence and inefficiency all

the way to malfeasance and injustice. The wide-ranging allegations put forward by Edmonds provides a basis upon which coverage over a variety of competing claims can be compared encompassing all of the dimensions of social level attribution and moral attribution.

Other whistleblowers considered for this study did not set forth allegations that included such a wide spectrum of social level attribution and moral attribution. For example, FBI whistleblower Colleen Rowley made claims about both individuals and institutions, but none of these allegations went further than attributing problems to incompetence or organizational dysfunction. Rowley did not make any claims that attributed problems to iniquities, either at the individual or systemic levels. This lack of framing possibility limited the usefulness of the case for making any conclusions about news organizations' tendency to embrace or avoid either individual iniquity or systemic iniquity frames.

Coverage over Edmonds also makes a good case because, according to the professional standards and ethics model as well as the market model, one would expect her core allegations of systemic iniquity to be covered. There is no reason to think that such a sensational, shocking story would not sell news in a market-oriented news system. A model of news coverage based on professional standards and ethics in journalism would also predict that her core allegations would make it into the news. She was deemed as credible by FBI reports and provided documentation and support for her allegations by introducing reporters to other witnesses in the FBI. Her core allegations also fit many of the criteria of newsworthiness as they involved high level public officials, were extremely consequential for national security, very relevant to ongoing issues, and could

be considered something that the public had a need to know. The allegation that the State Department and Pentagon were involved in an international criminal network that managed intelligence gathering in the FBI has obvious relevance to social change deviance and normative deviance, as well as political, cultural, and public significance. At the same time, the hegemony model would predict that her core allegations of systemic criminality operating within the State Department and Pentagon would be ignored or distorted in the news. Another whistleblower whose credibility was highly questionable, put forward a set of core allegations that could not be considered newsworthy according to professional standards, or made allegations that had little potential to sell news would be much less useful for providing a critical test of these competing models.

News coverage of Sibel Edmonds provides fertile ground for an examination of the relationship between the news media and whistleblowers, and to trace the conditions that give rise to coverage that can either protect or challenge the national security establishment.

Coding Process

Each article or transcript in the data set was coded for its representation of Edmonds' claims for its overall emphasis on the frames of individual inefficacy, individual iniquity, systemic inefficacy, or systemic iniquity. Articles did not necessarily focus on Sibel Edmonds. Many mentioned her claims in the context of other issues. I only coded statements in the articles that made references to Edmonds' claims, both direct quotes and authors' own wording. Whenever reference was made to Sibel

Edmonds' allegations, that statement was coded.

Many articles included multiple references and some of those included more than one frame. For articles that presented more than one frame, I noted all existing frames but did assign each article one primary frame according to a set of criteria. Primary frames were selected on the basis of space devoted to them as well as prominence and context. Prominence was determined by which frame was emphasized in the title and in the first and last paragraph. The context of each piece was considered when selecting the primary frame. Edmonds' allegations were often referenced in the context of a wider issue. Take, for example, an article presenting two statements representing Edmonds' allegations. One statement relays Edmonds' concerns about security lapses in the FBI's recruitment of translators (systemic inefficacy). Another statement mentions Edmonds' accusation that another translator in her department was a spy (individual iniquity). If these statements were situated in an article that was mainly focused upon the problem of bureaucratic bungling in the FBI, then the systemic inefficacy frame would be selected as the primary frame for how Edmonds' allegations were represented.

A more quantitative, mechanistic method of coding individual sentences or paragraphs and simply counting word space to determine primary codes may have made the study more easily replicable, but it is doubtful that such a method would have led to valid results. It made much more sense to code in a holistic manner taking into account space, prominence, and overall context than to code based solely on measures of space alone. This qualitative method captured a more valid picture of how readers are likely to subjectively interpret the overall portrayal of Edmonds' claims.

Coding for framing along the abstract dimensions of social level attribution and moral attribution was carried out in addition to noting the various substantive accusations represented in each article. So, for example, an article may have mainly represented Edmonds claims in terms of individual inefficacy. I recorded how that individual inefficacy frame was carried; for example the claim of “shoddy translations” by unqualified translators. Since I am paying attention to the detailed process of how her story was presented over time, and how coverage of her claims fit in within various models of news production, I recorded “analytic memos” for each article to keep track of developing narratives, relational contexts, and theoretical relevance. These memos were then reduced down in order to present a more concise yet detailed account of coverage over Edmonds allegations.

This study distinguishes itself from quantitative studies that code based on the extent of coverage for a particular issue or analyze coverage on the basis of what is deemed to be “positive” or “negative” coverage for a particular side. This method was useful for researchers to study how news content has an effect on public perceptions. However, its emphasis on measurable observations, i.e., the *extent* of coverage such as word counts of newspaper articles devoted to a certain issue, is a method of analysis that used in isolation from qualitative methods cannot go very far toward any critical view of *how* those issues are covered. It can help explain what issues become most salient, but not how the media draws the “pictures in our heads” of reality (Iyengar 1997).

Data Collection

By looking at Edmonds' accusations in her own words, and then looking at news coverage of her story, this case allows one to consider to what extent various models of news production explain coverage of her story. It can demonstrate whether we should sit back and take in the news with the assurance that major US media serve as watchdogs for the public or whether we should be alarmed by the possibility that major news organizations are in effect facilitating the ability of government to carry out criminal activity. News coverage of Sibel Edmonds provides fertile ground for an examination of the relationship between the news media and whistleblowers, and to trace the conditions that give rise to coverage that can either protect or challenge the national security establishment.

Before moving on to analyze how the news media reported the Sibel Edmonds story, it is necessary to give some background information about Sibel Edmonds and her claims. Out of the variety of ways the story might be told, I will unavoidably present one particular narrative. My account will privilege the way that Sibel Edmonds has told the story. The reason for this is not just because I think that her description and interpretation of events is the most "true," but because she puts forth a counter-hegemonic view that can be utilized later in the analysis as a theoretical reference point. Edmonds own story, the way she tells it, is a narrative than can be defined as counter-hegemonic because she sets forth a view that challenges the legitimacy of the powers in control of the political system on both sides of the party division.

First, Edmonds own statements are compiled from a variety of sources to identify her core allegations. In order to construct a narrative that gives privilege to the way Sibel

Edmonds told the story, I will draw from personal statements that she made public along with secondary sources that relied extensively and mostly exclusively on interviews with Edmonds. Edmonds has a website called justacitizen.org that makes available many of her public statements, press releases, legal documents, and interviews. The story will of course unavoidably depend much on my own interpretation of her interpretation, emphasizing her critique of the national security establishment. However, I will attempt to make my story as consistent as it is possible with the overall narrative that she presented. The purpose of this is not to provide any representative sample of framing in alternative sources, but rather to provide a frame of reference which to compare mainstream media coverage. Without this, one may argue that the reason news media avoided any particular frame in their coverage was because she never put forward the “raw materials” for such a frame. In addition, a semi-structured interview with Edmonds is conducted that explores her interactions with media organizations and attempts to identify the elements of her story she felt were most important and emphasized to journalists.

Next, newspaper articles and radio and television transcripts that mentioned Sibel Edmonds name were compiled and analyzed with special attention paid to how Edmonds allegations were represented, rather than a simple assessment of whether they constituted “positive” or “negative” coverage. Moving from Edmonds own statements to newspaper representation helps provide a frame of reference by which to judge how major news media presented the story in comparison to the range of possible frames presented by Edmonds. By looking outside of the institutionalized discourse in mainstream media, this method can capture what Lukes (1974) called the “second dimension of power,” where

the less visible processes of agenda-setting can be seen. According to Lukes, “power is exerted over the political agenda to make certain choices available and other choices unheard of” (21). Outsider claims are otherwise ignored by studies that begin analysis with visible conflict and thereby relegate themselves to elite conflict, thus falsely confirming pluralistic views of agenda setting.

COUNTER-HEGEMONIC NARRATIVE

The following is a construction of Sibel Edmonds’ story that privileges the counter-hegemonic aspects of her allegations. The purpose of this is to demonstrate that Edmonds definitely did put forward a systemic iniquity frame that the news media could have picked up. In fact, it is her claims of systemic criminality in the State Department and Pentagon and among congressional leaders that she considers the core of her allegations.¹

Sibel Edmonds grew up in Iran and Turkey, later moving to the United States. As a speaker of Turkish, Ajerbajani, and Farsi, she was hired as a contract linguist soon after 9/11. According to statements made to interviewers by Sibel Edmonds and her partner Matthew in a 2006 documentary film called *Kill the Messenger*,² the two were approached in December of 2001 by one of the other translators in the department, Melek Dickerson. Dickerson introduced Edmonds to her husband, US Air Force Major Douglas Dickerson. Sibel Edmond’s husband Matthew recounts the visit to their house with a

¹ Edmonds, Sibel (telephone interview, October 24, 2007)

² Mauro, F., Nahon, B., Roblin, F., & Rozenberg, P. (Producers) & Verboud, M. & Villet, R. (Directors). (2006). *Kill the Messenger* [Motion Picture]. France: Zadig Productions.

sense of dismay, stating that Major Douglas Dickerson explained that he worked in the “arms procurement” business, acting as a liaison with various countries in Central Asia. He was particularly interested in talking about people he hoped Sibel Edmonds would meet in the American-Turkish Council, a lobbying organization largely concerned with the arms business.

In a telephone interview published online, Edmonds describes the scene: “It was the husband who started talking about this semi-legitimate organization: ‘Hey, have you ever heard of this group?’ he said, casually mentioning this organization to my husband. He replied, ‘Yeah, I know about them.’ And I started sweating, because I knew this organization was under FBI investigation, and I was by law not allowed to discuss anything about it with my husband.”³

According to Edmond’s husband Matthew, he told Major Dickerson that he thought one would have to “have a business relationship, or have a reason” to be involved with the group.⁴ Dickerson’s reply was peculiar. Dickerson said (according to Matthew Edmonds), “You, Sibel, all you have to do is tell them who you are and what you do, and you can be a member of that organization, and then you can retire with a very good life.”

The “high-level friends” and the organization that the Dickersons were talking about were targets of surveillance that both Sibel Edmonds and Melek Dickerson were charged with monitoring. Edmonds believed that the Dickerson’s surprise Sunday

³ Deliso, C. (2004). An interview with Sibel Edmonds. Retrieved April 11, 2008, from antiwar.com Web site: <http://antiwar.com/deliso/?articleid=2917%3E>

⁴ Mauro, F., Nahon, B., Roblin, F., & Rozenberg, P. (Producers) & Verboud, M. & Villet, R. (Directors). (2006). *Kill the Messenger* [Motion Picture]. France: Zadig Productions.

morning visit to her home was part of an effort to infiltrate and manipulate FBI surveillance. “We would never have to work again, they promised.”⁵

Edmonds told to “Hush it”

Soon after the visit, Edmonds went to her direct supervisor, Michael Feghali. In a phone interview published online, she describes the reaction from her supervisor as the “hooking” procedure.⁶ When she first reported her concerns, she said the manager offered her a “workplace opportunity” in which she could bring her “school bag” to work on the weekends to just study and do no work, but that she could record the time as hours worked, “making something like \$700 in a weekend – specifically for not working!” She also said she was told that whenever she went to visit her family in Turkey, if she just made an appearance in the liaison office in Ankara then all her expenses could be covered by the FBI. She refused these offers, based on her reasoning that “if you do, then they [the FBI] can use it against you. Maybe discover irregularities in your expenses at some later date, ‘forged’ documents, or else just hold it over your head. They love to do things like that to hold you in their power.”⁷

Rather than investigating her report, she recounts, nothing happened other than being told to “hush it and not talk about it.”⁸ According to the Vanity Fair article, shortly after reporting her suspicions about Dickerson to her direct supervisor Michael Feghali,

⁵ Deliso, C. (2004). An interview with Sibel Edmonds. Retrieved April 11, 2008, from antiwar.com Web site: <http://antiwar.com/deliso/?articleid=2917%3E>

⁶ Deliso, C. (2004). An interview with Sibel Edmonds. Retrieved April 11, 2008, from antiwar.com Web site: <http://antiwar.com/deliso/?articleid=2917%3E>

⁷ Deliso, C. (2004). An interview with Sibel Edmonds. Retrieved April 11, 2008, from antiwar.com Web site: <http://antiwar.com/deliso/?articleid=2917%3E>

⁸ Mauro, F., Nahon, B., Roblin, F., & Rozenberg, P. (Producers) & Verboud, M. & Villet, R. (Directors). (2006). *Kill the Messenger* [Motion Picture]. France: Zadig Productions.

Dickerson pushed for a new method of dividing labor among the Turkish translators, of which there were only three. She suggested dividing the work to permanently assign specific FBI targets to translators rather than randomly assigning work. Dickerson even submitted a list of who would be assigned which targets. “As Edmonds would later tell her FBI bosses and congressional investigators, Dickerson had assigned the American-Turkish Council and three other “high-value” diplomatic targets, including her friend, to herself.”⁹ Supervisor Feghali accepted the proposal, even after hearing Edmonds’ suspicions. Melek Dickerson then began translating all communications related to the targets under question.

In mid-January, 2002, Edmonds learned that the FBI Special Agent in charge of Turkish counter-intelligence Dennis Saccher also had concerns about Dickerson. According to Edmonds the agent had discovered “on numerous occasions Dickerson had marked calls involving her friend and other counter-intelligence targets as ‘not pertinent,’ or had submitted only brief summaries stating that they contained nothing of interest.”¹⁰ The agent wondered why Edmonds was no longer working on these targets, and Edmonds told him about reporting her suspicions about Dickerson to Feghali and Feghali’s later approval of Dickerson’s labor division scheme. Agent Saccher asked Edmonds and a third translator, Kevin Taskasen, to review some of the recordings Dickerson had marked as not pertinent. Edmonds soon came to believe that certain intercepts were being systematically blocked.

⁹ Rose, D. (2005, September). An inconvenient patriot. *Vanity Fair*, p. 264-282.

¹⁰ Rose, D. (2005, September). An inconvenient patriot. *Vanity Fair*, p. 264-282.
<proxy.mul.missouri.edu:2084/universe >

What was in those blocked intercepts? According to an unnamed congressional source who spoke to *Vanity Fair*, Edmonds testified in a secret hearing that in one conversation, a State Department staffer told a Turkish official he would send a representative to the American-Turkish Council office to pick up \$7,000 in cash. This unnamed congressional source is quoted saying, “She told us she’d heard mention of exchanges of information, dead drops, that kind of thing. It was mostly money in exchange for secrets.”¹¹ According to this source other recordings suggested that a Pentagon official involved in the arms trade was being paid off, and that organizations operating out of Central Asia were pursuing business in the nuclear black-market, money-laundering, drug trafficking, and the illegal sale of secret military technologies.

Edmonds cannot state specifics, but she helps by pointing to an article authored by ex-CIA Station Chief of Turkey Phillip Giraldi as one of the best pieces written on her allegations “with some of the organizations named, some of the countries named, and some of the people named.”¹² The named organizations in this article are the American Turkish Council, American Turkish Cultural Alliance, Assembly of Turkish American Associations, and AIPAC and other Israeli lobbying groups.¹³ Edmonds told me that the scheme went beyond just Turkey: “Dickerson worked for two organizations that at face value the organization seems to be a Turkish organization. However, these organizations, they are heavily connected to the 'Stans, you know, Pakistan, Tajikistan, especially Azerbaijan. And they also are heavily, coordinated their activities with other countries

¹¹ Rose, D. (2005, September). An inconvenient patriot. *Vanity Fair*, p. 264-282. <proxy.mul.missouri.edu:2084/universe >

¹² Edmonds, Sibel (telephone interview, October 24, 2007)

¹³ Deliso, C. (2004). An interview with Sibel Edmonds. Retrieved April 11, 2008, from antiwar.com Web site: <http://antiwar.com/deliso/?articleid=2917%3E>

like Israel. For example, if you look at ATA and ATC.”¹⁴ Giraldi’s article sets forth allegations that business lobby organizations connected with Turkish military generals involved in arms and drug dealing were bribing congressional members in order to gain lucrative contracts and access to weapons technologies that were later sold to Pakistan, China, and India using forged end-user certificates. Giraldi contends that members of the neoconservative network were facilitating these arrangements, including Douglas Feith, Richard Perle, Marc Grossman, Eric Edelman, and Paul Wolfowitz.¹⁵

Journalist David Rose writes for Vanity Fair that Dennis Saccher, the Special Agent in charge of Turkish counter-intelligence, scheduled a meeting to take place between himself, Sibel Edmonds, Turkish translator Kevin Taskasen, and supervisor Michael Feghali, to whom Edmonds had reported her suspicions and who later approved of Dickerson’s peculiar proposal for dividing work. Earlier in the day before the scheduled meeting, agent Saccher, Edmonds, and Taskasen all met together without Feghali’s knowledge. After the meeting between the three, supervisor Feghali saw translators Edmonds and Taskasen and told them that agent Saccher, whom they had just seen, had been sent into the field that day and would not make it to the meeting. Meanwhile, according to Edmonds in Vanity Fair, agent Saccher had been told by supervisor Feghali that the meeting had been postponed. Later, agent Saccher was ordered from above to stay away from the case and forbidden from obtaining copies of the translations Edmonds did during her review of the surveillance intercepts marked “non-pertinent” by Melek Dickerson.

¹⁴ Edmonds, Sibel (telephone interview, October 24, 2007)

¹⁵ Deliso, C. (2004). An interview with Sibel Edmonds. Retrieved April 11, 2008, from antiwar.com Web site: <http://antiwar.com/deliso/?articleid=2917%3E>

Edmonds moved up one rung in the ladder and met with Translation Department Supervisor Stephanie Bryan, who asked that Edmonds write her accusations in a secret memo on her home computer over that weekend and submit it on the following Monday. On Tuesday, Translation Department Supervisor Stephanie Bryan called Edmonds to her office and told her that she had sent the memo to Supervisory Special Agent Thomas Fields. However, Translation Department Supervisor Bryan said that Supervisory Special Agent Fields would not look at the memo until Michael Feghali and Melek Dickerson commented on it. Even worse, Edmonds learned that she was now the subject of an investigation into the possibility that she violated her security clearance by using her home computer to write the memo even though she claimed that Supervisor Stephanie Bryan asked her to do so.

Moving up higher in the chain of command, Edmonds met with Deputy Assistant Director for Counter-Terrorism and Counter-Intelligence James Caruso. At this meeting, Edmonds told her story but Caruso asked no questions. Edmonds tells Vanity Fair that after the meeting, while having lunch with her partner Matthew, two people pulled up in an FBI vehicle. Without ordering anything the FBI agents sat down at a table next to them and stared. Coming to the realization that her warnings within the internal chain of command were not welcome and could perhaps lead to a dangerous backlash, that same day Edmonds wrote to the Justice Department's Internal-Affairs Division, the Office of Professional Responsibility, and the Office of the Inspector General (OIG). She also faxed members of the Senate Intelligence Committee and the Senate Judiciary Committee.

On March 22, 2002, Sibel Edmonds was called to Translation Department Supervisor Stephanie Bryan's office to meet with Bryan, Supervisory Special Agent Thomas Frields, the Chief of Personnel Security, and the person in charge of investigating her case. She says that her direct supervisor Mike Feghali walked by and said, "In less than an hour you will be fired, you whore."¹⁶ Security escorted her out of the building after the meeting. According to Edmonds, in the elevator on the way out Supervisory Special Agent Thomas Frields told her: "We will be watching you, we will be listening to you, you cannot talk about any of these issues you reported outside, you cannot, you don't even have a right to any attorney."¹⁷ In another account of the day she was fired, she said, "this guy, one of my superiors, tried to act tough and threatened me that if I said anything to the press, the congress, or even a lawyer, 'the next time I see you will be in jail.' I replied, 'well, I may be in jail, but I won't be the one behind bars.'¹⁸

Surprisingly, Melek Dickerson meanwhile continued to work translating top-secret material even though the FBI had conceded that some of Edmonds' suspicions about Dickerson were verified. Under the lawsuit, Douglas and Melek Dickerson were scheduled to give a deposition. The judge had subpoenaed them both and ordered them not to leave the United States. However, before the scheduled deposition the US Air Force transferred Douglas Dickerson to an assignment at a NATO base in Belgium. Dickerson was made to declare under oath that if requested, he would return, at the FBI's

¹⁶ Deliso, C. (2004). An interview with Sibel Edmonds. Retrieved April 11, 2008, from antiwar.com Web site: <http://antiwar.com/deliso/?articleid=2917%3E>

¹⁷ Mauro, F., Nahon, B., Roblin, F., & Rozenberg, P. (Producers) & Verboud, M. & Villet, R. (Directors). (2006). *Kill the Messenger* [Motion Picture]. France: Zadig Productions.

¹⁸ Deliso, C. (2004). An interview with Sibel Edmonds. Retrieved April 11, 2008, from antiwar.com Web site: <http://antiwar.com/deliso/?articleid=2917%3E>

expense.¹⁹ In response to a letter from Sibel Edmonds, Colonel James Worth of the Office of the Air Force Inspector General said that a review of Major Dickerson's relationship with the American-Turkish Council found "no evidence of any deviation from the scope of his duties."²⁰ In Belgium, Dickerson was promoted from Major to Lieutenant Colonel and then sent to Yokota US Air Force Base in Japan.

During her work with the FBI, Edmonds saw problems that ranged from individual incompetence, individual criminality, and systemic ineptitude, all the way to systemic criminality. The following passage from an interview I conducted with Edmonds in October of 2007 highlights the latter:

You kind of, I mean in a way you say, "My God, if we had a real media and if it were to come out and gather these agents and what they provided to the media would all come out, you're looking at maybe people like taking up arms and saying, maybe it's needed, revolution," because you're not looking at only some corruption itself within the Congress. It's regrettable, Ryan, because my stuff dealt with at least five people and their files were dating back to 1997, and it is nauseating what is happening. However, while I was there, and one of the things I was being told by my agents, you know how much of this is from that other translators in the Arabic department are coming across similar, involving some other sets, or some of them crossing each other, overlapping, you know, the ones who are corrupted by Saudis, the ones who are corrupted by China. It's not only Congress, then you get into the State Department, and then you get into these private, they're, that have set themselves up as some kind of interest lobbying group and some of them are even NGOs and you say, "My God." I mean, it doesn't matter who the administration is. To protect those interests, any of this information comes out, things will turn upside down. It's not only this person here or that person there, it is so wide and ingrained, and it's being allowed to happen, because there's so many hands coming from this powerful level to the same bucket. That's as far as the reaction to these concerns and this is exactly why they did this state secrets privilege. They cannot let that happen, they, it comes out, it's not going to touch our national security. It's gonna touch, and forget about the foreigners involved, because that's obvious why they're involved.

¹⁹ Deliso, C. (2004). An interview with Sibel Edmonds. Retrieved April 11, 2008, from antiwar.com Web site: <http://antiwar.com/deliso/?articleid=2917%3E>

²⁰ Rose, D. (2005, September). An inconvenient patriot. *Vanity Fair*, p. 264-282.

The real players here are American, Americans in high levels and not only the ones in high levels because the elections because people think people go away, like some of those people who carried the activities during, let's say, Clinton. Extremely lucrative, high-level positions today. And with their people left in there within again, the agencies, whether its the Pentagon or the State Department, they're not out. People, they think they come and then the election happens, somebody else comes in and they go away.²¹

Edmonds clearly put forth allegations that can be considered counter-hegemonic, falling within the systemic iniquity frame. Though it may be argued that the above narrative is merely one possible construction, it is undeniable that Edmonds put forward claims that challenged the legitimacy of the national security state. In addition, these were what Edmonds considered her core allegations.²² These are the kinds of claims one would expect a pluralist news system to incorporate into the representation of her allegations and perhaps even foreground. They are allegations that would be considered newsworthy according to professional standards of journalism, and they are extremely sensational as they involve widespread corruption among high-level officials. They are also the kinds of claims one would expect a hegemonic news system to cover up and distort, if they were covered at all. So, how did the news media represent the allegations put forward by Sibel Edmonds?

BECOMING A WHISTLEBLOWER: NEWS REPRESENTATIONS OF EDMONDS' ALLEGATIONS

In comparison to some other high profile FBI whistleblowers in the news during the same period, Sibel Edmonds was featured in a relatively large number of stories. For

²¹ Edmonds, Sibel (telephone interview, October 24, 2007)

²² Edmonds, Sibel (telephone interview, October 24, 2007)

five years after January of 2002, FBI whistleblower Colleen Rowley is mentioned most of all but Edmonds received much more coverage than FBI whistleblowers Mike German and Robert Wright. Certainly, she was not ignored in the news. Considering the relatively extensive coverage over Edmonds, almost all of it sympathetic, one might assume that this whistleblower was successful getting core allegations into the public eye. However, before coming to this conclusion it is necessary to actually look at the content of these news stories and assess how her allegations were conveyed to the public.

A full-text search through Lexis-Nexis of general news in major English language newspapers, radio, and television broadcasts issued between January 2002 and March 2009 using "Sibel Edmonds" as a search term yields ninety relevant results. All items were included in the data set whether they were presented as news or opinion pieces. Items that mentioned Sibel Edmonds' name but did not represent allegations about what she discovered while working inside the FBI were not included.

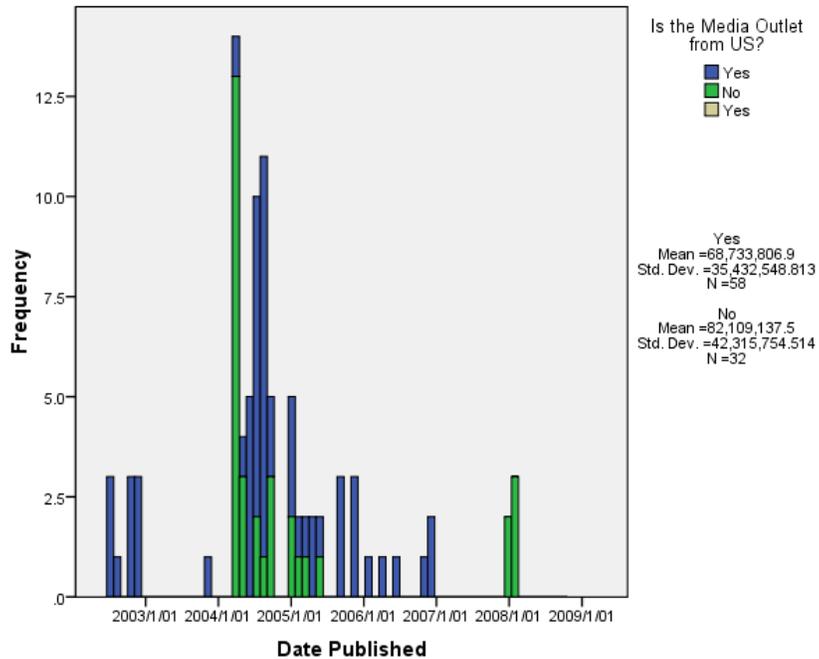
Five relevant television broadcasts and one radio broadcast turned up in the search along with eighty-four relevant newspaper items. A handful of those newspaper items were opinion pieces but the vast majority were news articles. Thirty-two separate major news outlets produced items either featuring Edmonds or representing her claims within the context of a related story. The Washington Post and London Independent tie for the largest number of news stories with fourteen each, followed by the New York Times with twelve and its international version the International Herald Tribune with six. The Washington Times published five items and the London Times published three. The rest of the media outlets represented in the data set produced one or two items. Sixty-six percent of articles were published in US newspapers, while thirty-four percent were

published in British, Australian, and Canadian papers.

News coverage of Sibel Edmonds spanned over six years. The first news item produced by major English language news outlets appeared in the Washington Post on June 19, 2002. The last appeared in the London Times on January 27, 2008. Three distinct phases of coverage can be seen in the histogram below.

Figure 2: Graph 1

Frequency of News Items in Major Media Outlets from 2002 to 2009, Divided by US-Based News Organizations and Non-US-Based News Organizations



The first phase of coverage lasted between June of 2002 until the end of that year. US media organizations produced ten news items during this period and then the story went dormant throughout 2003 except for one feature in Newsweek Magazine. All was quiet until, in the spring of 2004, there was a huge surge in coverage of Sibel Edmonds.

It was precipitated by coverage in foreign English language newspapers, as evidenced in the histogram above. In the beginning of April 2004, while US newspapers said nothing about Edmonds, English language newspapers outside the US were abuzz with her name. This was the point soon after Edmonds had linked up with 9/11 families and testified, at their urging, in a hearing held before the 9/11 Commission and made statements to the press that directly contradicted a declaration made by Condoleeza Rice to the Commission that defended the Bush administration against criticism for missing vital warning signs prior to the attack. Rice stated that no officials had any warning that al Qai'da was planning to attack targets inside the United States using hijacked airliners, but Edmonds called this "an outrageous lie." Only after this enormous surge in coverage by foreign English language newspapers, the largest peak overall, domestic newspapers again began to publish stories that featured Edmonds. Her name is mentioned in a large number of news items during this period as it tapered off until going dormant again at the end of 2007. One remaining spike in coverage occurs at the beginning of 2008. This spike was comprised of only six articles, five of which were published in the London Times and Australian. As of March 2009, no additional news items have been produced by any major media organization after this spike.

Throughout the roughly seven years that Edmonds was mentioned in the mainstream media, her allegations were represented in a stunningly diverse variety of ways. This is a testament to the complexity of her story, but also to the fact that prevailing political debates provided a variety of contexts in which certain aspects of her story could be situated. Overall, the most common way of representing her allegations was in terms of systemic inefficacy either in the FBI or in the Bush Administration. This

portrayal dominated fifty-nine items in the data set. Next, fifteen items highlighted the individual iniquity of her co-worker engaging in espionage. Eight news items emphasized the individual inefficacy of either “incompetent translators” or incompetent FBI managers. Finally, eight items, all of them produced by English language news organizations outside the United States, stressed the counter-hegemonic frame of systemic iniquity on the part of US government institutions engaged in criminal activities.

When iniquity was highlighted, it was always low-level individuals; almost always about Edmonds’ co-worker and sometimes her supervisor but never high-level officials like Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert. Such conspicuous absence of Marc Grossman, Douglas Feith, Richard Perle and others goes against what we would expect in both the market model and the professional standards model. According to the market model we would expect the most dramatic, sensational aspects of her story to be discussed. Although possible espionage by a co-worker is quite sensational, the prospect of speaker of the house Dennis Hastert and top State Department and Pentagon officials taking bribes is even more sensational. This is one of the most outstanding findings of the study.

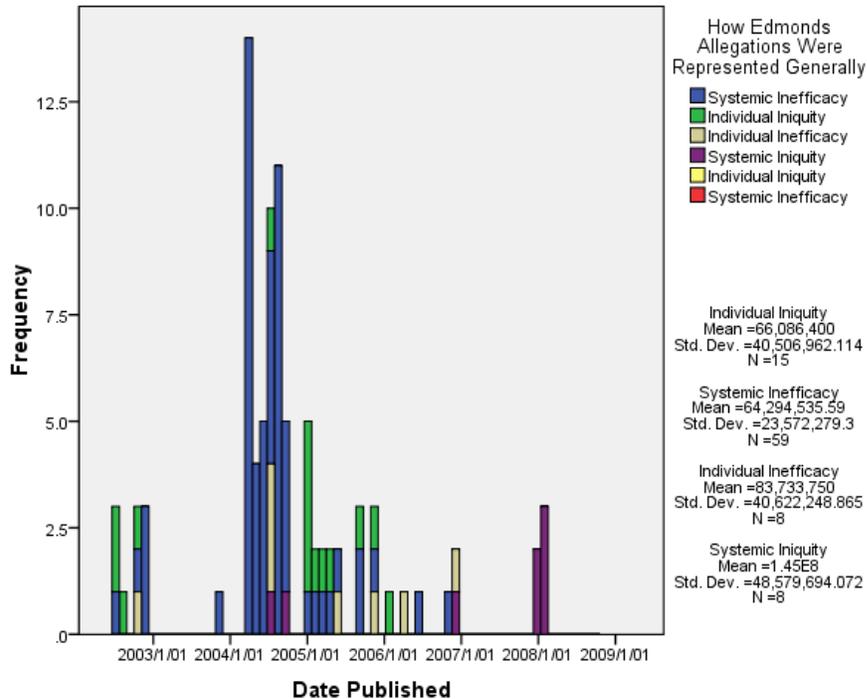
From the histogram below, one can gather that the individual iniquity and individual inefficacy frames held relatively constant through the period in question. The systemic inefficacy frame, however, follows more of an irregular pattern, carrying the spike of coverage in 2004 and mostly dominating the news until the end of 2005. The counter-hegemonic frame of systemic iniquity also followed an irregular pattern, being conspicuously absent throughout most of the coverage until a three-part feature running

in the London Times English resulted in a final spike in coverage in the beginning of 2008.

This counter-hegemonic representation published in the London Times did not carry over into any other news pieces. According to the market model, we might expect that at least then it would spread to other papers including US papers. Such stories are expensive to make, requiring in depth investigative reporting, so that might have explained why news organizations did not publish any such stories until that point. However, at the point where the London Times did release a news story revealing the systemic iniquity frame, other news outlets could have simply lifted it for free but they still did not touch it. One might argue that they did not want to touch it because by this time Sibel Edmonds was “old news” and they would want to put their own angle on it, but this does not hold because at other times, still late in the game, news organizations did indeed lift stories from other sources emphasizing other frames.

Figure 3: Graph 2

Frequency of News Items in Major Media Outlets from 2002 to 2009, Divided by Framing Categories



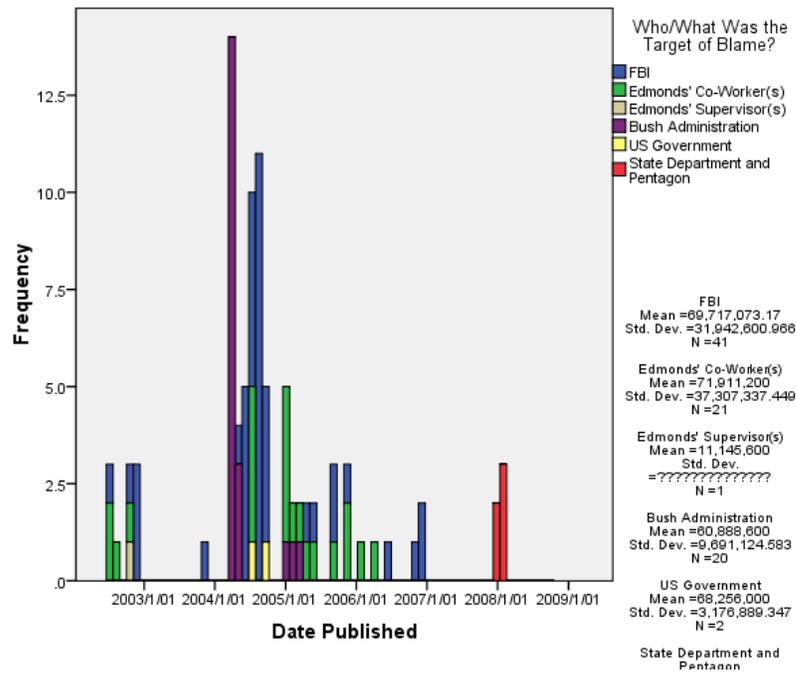
It is also important to note what individuals or institutions were portrayed as being the target of blame within Edmonds’ allegations. The FBI itself was most often granted this position, in forty-one out of the ninety news items, or forty-six percent. Edmonds co-workers were second overall as targets of attribution, being blamed for incompetence, espionage, or corruption in twenty-one articles or twenty-three percent of all items in the data set. Among government institutions, the Bush administration follows that lead with twenty items, or twenty-two percent.

The State Department and Pentagon, the government institutions at the heart of Edmonds’ counter-hegemonic claims, were emphasized as targets of her allegations in only five of the news items. These five news items were the last news articles produced

about Edmonds as of the time of writing this study, all in foreign English language outlets.

Figure 4: Graph 3

Frequency of News Items in Major Media Outlets from 2002 to 2009, Divided by Targets of Attribution



The above histograms help to summarize news coverage over Edmonds' allegations. In the first phase of coverage, Edmonds' claims were represented as centering on the dysfunction of the FBI and the incompetence and corruption of Edmonds' co-workers working in the translation unit. Suddenly, in the Spring of 2004, foreign English language newspapers produced numerous items portraying Edmonds' allegations as centering upon the failure of the Bush administration to heed warnings about the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. That characterization dominated until US news organizations started dealing with Edmonds

again, but this time changing the target of attribution from the Bush administration to the FBI for its own failure to recognize intelligence data that warned of the attack.

Representations of her allegations largely go back to how they were portrayed originally in the summer of 2002, and then the story dies. Interestingly, one final gasp is made at the beginning of 2008 in a handful of articles written by a team of reporters from the London Times, this time framing the allegations in terms of systemic iniquity; actually relaying Edmonds' counter-hegemonic claims about illegal operations carried out routinely by the State Department and Pentagon. Even more interesting, and tragic, is that after this three part expose published by the London Times, nothing is produced about Sibel Edmonds again in the mainstream media. In sum, Edmonds core claims of systemic iniquity were almost completely ignored.

Phase One: June 2002 to December 2002

By early summer, the performance of intelligence and law enforcement agencies before and after the Sept. 11 attack became an area of active inquiry. Members of the Senate Judiciary Committee began to show an interest in Sibel Edmond's allegations after she had met with Senator Grassley's and Senator Leahy's staffers in March. The Judiciary Committee held two unclassified meetings in June and July of 2002. Senators Leahy and Grassley, along with senate staffers, met with FBI officials to discuss Sibel Edmonds' accusations. Two days after the first meeting with FBI officials, Senators Grassley and Leahy sent a letter to Glenn Fine of the Justice Department Office of Inspector General. They urged the OIG to begin an independent investigation into the FBI's actions.

This letter was made public and it indicated that the FBI conceded in the meeting with the Judiciary Committee that some of Edmond's allegations were verified. It confirmed that the co-worker Edmonds suspected of infiltration had indeed worked for the organization under question (although the American-Turkish Council was not named), that the co-worker had "unreported contacts" with at least one of the targets of surveillance, and that the co-worker had not translated two communications from the targeted official.²³ Edmonds contends that, "[a]ctually, there were hundreds of cases from November 2001 to February 2002 in which she obstructed investigations with her translations – or lack thereof."²⁴ At any rate, Edmonds' allegations were now gaining some attention. The day Leahy and Grassley sent this letter to the OIG and made it public, a story about Edmonds finally broke in the mainstream national news media, the Washington Post.

On June 19, 2002, the Washington Post quietly broke the story on page A10 in a news article by staff writer James Grimaldi. At this point in time, Edmonds had already reported her concerns up the chain of command, had been fired, and had contacted members of the Judiciary Committee about what she had seen inside the FBI. The story is embedded within the context of the September 11 attacks, during the summer of 2002 when the FBI was under fire by the Judiciary Committee for apparently ignoring clear warnings that, if pursued, may have prevented the hijackings. As the Post reported, "The allegations add a new dimension to the growing criticism of the FBI, which has centered

²³ Leahy, P., & Grassley, C. Letter to Glenn Fine of the Office of Inspector General. Retrived April 9, 2007, from Sibel Edmonds – Official Web Site – www.JustaCitizen.org:

www.justacitizen.com/articles_documents/Leahy_Grassley_Letter_to_Fine_6-19-02.pdf>

²⁴ Deliso, C. (2004). An interview with Sibel Edmonds. Retrieved April 11, 2008, from antiwar.com Web site: <http://antiwar.com/deliso/?articleid=2917%3E>

in recent weeks on the bureau's failure to heed internal warnings about al Qaeda leading up to the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks."²⁵ Sibel Edmonds' allegations, according to the story, prompted Democratic Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy and Republican Senator Charles Grassley to pose what they called "critical questions" about intelligence gathering and analysis at the FBI.

One can get a general idea of how Edmonds' allegations were represented just by reading the headline of the article: "2 FBI Whistle-Blowers Allege Lax Security, Possible Espionage." The headline suggests an internal and an external threat. The internal threat is "lax security" indicating, at most, a lack of proper vigilance on the part of the FBI in the face of external threats posed by foreign countries that might wish to infiltrate the organization.

Two whistleblowers are mentioned as "alleging mismanagement and lax security." The other FBI whistleblower, John Cole, is said to have "observed what he believed was a security lapse regarding the screening and hiring of translators." The majority of the article, however, focuses on Sibel Edmonds. "That whistle-blower, Sibel Edmonds, 32, a former wiretap translator in the Washington field office, raised suspicions about a co-worker's connections to a group under surveillance." The article reported that Edmonds "became particularly alarmed when she discovered that a recently hired FBI translator was saying that she belonged to the Middle Eastern organization whose taped conversations she had been translating for FBI counterintelligence agents," that the co-worker had also had unreported contacts with a foreign government official who was a target of the surveillance, and that the FBI confirmed that this co-worker was

²⁵ Grimaldi, J.V. (2002, June 19). 2 FBI whistle-blowers allege lax security, possible espionage. *The Washington Post*. p. A10

a member of this organization.

Grimaldi relates Edmonds bizarre Sunday morning conversation in which Edmonds believed her co-worker tried to convince her to join this as yet unnamed organization. “There are a lot of advantages of being with this organization and doing things together,” Edmonds recalls her co-worker’s husband telling her and then she points out, “this is our targeted organization.”²⁶ Grimaldi also described how the co-worker devised a scheme to divide work so that she would be able to translate conversations involving her acquaintance exclusively.

The Post story paints a very vivid depiction of Edmonds’ unsettling experience with the co-worker whom she suspected of directly sabotaging intelligence gathering, but the story leaves other, even more unsettling components of Edmonds’ story out of the picture. For example, Edmonds’ claim that her supervisor was the one who had approved her co-worker’s scheme to divide labor, even after Edmonds’ reported her suspicions, is left out of the account. This absent piece of the story suggests that people involved in infiltration within the FBI went further than just Edmonds’ co-worker and her co-worker’s husband. Resistance to her allegations from every level within the FBI is addressed only briefly, relaying that after her reports to supervisors “no action was taken” and that she was later fired for what the Justice Department characterized as “disruption.” The question over why her allegations were handled this way is not pursued in the story.

²⁶ Grimaldi implies that Edmonds was interviewed by stating, “Edmonds was approached for an interview,” and then quoting Edmonds without clarifying that she declined to be interviewed by the Post. As she explained in a telephone interview with me on October 27, 2007, she did not grant an interview with the Post because at the time she still believed that “there were so-called channels” inside the government to pursue her allegations.

Edmonds own account includes much more unnerving allegations that necessitate interpretations going far beyond such relatively benign suppositions as “lax security” and “mismanagement.”

The possibility that something more than just foreign espionage coupled with lax security is never suggested or examined nor were questions adequately addressed concerning what group Edmonds was fingering in her accusations of espionage. The article states that Edmonds became concerned after discovering that her co-worker had “belonged to the *Middle Eastern organization* whose taped conversations she had been translating for FBI counterintelligence agents.” Grimaldi states, “Officials asked that the name of the target group not be revealed for national security reasons.” It is a common convention for journalists to protect information that could disrupt an ongoing investigation, although they are under no obligation to do so. At this point in time before many details of the case were publicly known, the Post’s decision not to name the American Turkish Council as the group in question is consistent with professional standards to protect the integrity of ongoing investigations.

However, the Post not only protected the name of the organization from public view, but also protected the identity of the country from which this organization operated and the nationality of the foreign government official whom Edmonds’ co-worker had unreported contacts. Rather than choosing to reveal Turkey as the country in question, the only clue we are given is that the organization Edmonds’ co-worker was a part of is based in a “Middle Eastern” nation. It is safe to say that, so soon after the 9/11 attack, readers might conclude that this was a Middle Eastern country considered to be an enemy of the US such as Iran or Iraq; not, as it turned out, Turkey, which was at the time

bolstered by the Bush administration as a prominent ally in the “war on terror” despite its record of state terror and other human rights abuses.

Perhaps Grimaldi and his editors did not know it was Turkey, but this is highly unlikely. The assumption that they knew it was Turkey is fair considering that Grimaldi explained in the article that officials had requested that the name of the target organization not be divulged, rather than writing that the name was unknown. The extent of information to which the reporters had access also indicates that they knew the organization or at least the country with which it was associated. For example, they write: "Edmonds would not identify the other translator, but The Post has learned from other sources that she is a 33-year-old U.S. citizen whose native country is home to the target group. Both Edmonds and the other translator are U.S. citizens who trace their ethnicity to the same Middle Eastern country." At the time, Edmonds' background was not a secret. If Grimaldi knew Edmonds' background, he could have figured out the country in question if he did not already know it. Grassley and Leahy staffers or Edmonds' lawyers may have even told the Post the languages she spoke and from where she had come. It is difficult to presume that the Post reporters did not already know, or could not find out, the identity of the country in question. Therefore, we can conclude that the Post chose to keep Turkey from being named in the story. The fact that they did not reveal specific information is understandable in light of professional standards in journalism, but the fact that, in the post-9/11 climate, they chose to use “Middle Eastern country” to describe it appears irresponsible at best. The choice is likely an example of pressure from official sources and concerns about state flak overriding professional standards and ethics.

The choice to refer to the target organization in such effectively insinuating terms in this breaking article had serious implications for how the story was covered in other news sources. The target of investigation was continually referred to as a “Middle Eastern organization,” “Middle Eastern group,” or “an organization with ties to the Middle East” in other news articles. If the Post would have instead referred to the American Turkish Council as “a business organization” or “a trade organization” based in “a nation traditionally regarded as a prominent ally,” then the conclusions that many readers (and other reporters) drew would have likely changed dramatically.

I asked Edmonds what she thought of this reference. She answered, “Well, the fact that the country, first of all that singular country was wrong, and that singular organization, because Dickerson worked for two organizations that at face value the organization seems to be a Turkish organization. However, these organizations, they are heavily connected to the 'Stans, you know, Pakistan, Tajikistan, especially Azerbaijan. And they also are heavily, coordinated their activities with other countries like Israel. For example, if you look at ATA and ATC.”²⁷

Edmonds further elaborated: “then the same thing is true with many [...] other publications. They would refrain from naming the country and organizations because it didn't fit the "axis of evil" model. You know, and I believe it would have been a similar pattern if it was, because some of my case involved, again, these activities that were carried out jointly between the Turks and Pakistanis, and not only Pakistani government related people like the ISI station in Washington, DC, but also with certain organizations that are heavily involved in lobbying for Pakistan.” Edmonds’ perception that media

²⁷ Edmonds, Sibel (telephone interview, October 24, 2007)

outlets used “Middle Eastern organization” because it fit within the Bush administration’s rhetoric drumming up fear and anxiety over “axis of evil” countries after September 11th has merit. Journalists and their editors probably felt pressure to conform to the imagery their routine sources inside the Bush administration preferred. The story of a worker inside the FBI possibly serving as a mole for a “Middle Eastern organization” apparently from an enemy state was juicy and had the potential to sell news, but a story based upon what Edmonds told me in the interview would likely have the potential to sell even more news. Despite journalistic standards as well as market imperatives, not to mention the *truth*, these journalists went along with the portrayal preferred by official sources and their fellow journalists ran with it.

On June 19, 2002, on the same day Leahy and Grassley’s letter was sent and the day the Washington Post article broke the story in the national media, Edmonds lawyers filed suit against the FBI and Justice Department. The lawsuit claimed that she was illegally terminated in retaliation for her complaints to superiors, and for violation of her first amendment rights. Encouraged by the apparent protection provided by congressional interest and the ensuing media attention, the lawsuit was a chance for Edmonds to prove her case in court. As the months passed, however, judges overseeing Edmonds trial would set hearing dates that were later cancelled without explanation. The DoJ OIG investigation continued, but reported nothing. Leahy and Grassley sent more public letters to John Ashcroft and Director Robert Mueller, but no substantial action was taken by congress.

A handful of news articles followed her case during that time. Overall, during the summer of 2002 Edmonds’ allegations were portrayed in terms of systemic inefficacy

(“lax security”) but also included individual incompetence (“mismanagement”), and individual iniquity (foreign espionage). In news articles mostly written by James Grimaldi of the Washington Post, Edmonds is portrayed as claiming “mismanagement, lax security – and possibly even espionage,”²⁸ that “she reported suspicious comments and activities of a fellow translator,”²⁹ that her co-worker had “unreported contacts with the Middle Eastern target of secretly taped conversations,”³⁰ that she put forward “allegations of espionage,”³¹ and that she was fired after “reporting the behavior of her Washington field office colleague.”³² All of these assertions are indeed claims made by Edmonds, but conspicuously absent from these accounts are any components of her story that point toward the counter-hegemonic aspects of her allegations identifying systemic iniquities. These were left out of the story at the beginning, and other stories about Edmonds later on generally followed this lead.

Near the end of the summer of 2002, Edmonds was subpoenaed in a class action lawsuit filed on behalf of 600 9/11 families against Saudi banks, charities, and businesses for their alleged complicity in the attack. Edmonds was ordered to make a deposition regarding her allegations that the FBI had evidence of the Sept. 11 plot, a deposition she would later be barred from making

On October 18, 2002, Attorney General John Ashcroft invoked a rarely used

²⁸ Standora, L. (2002, June 19). 2 more squeal on FBI lapses. *Daily News* (New York). P. 22

²⁹ Grimaldi, J.V. (2002, July 1). With public notice on first amendment, FDA appears on the verge of major policy shift. *The Washington Post*.

³⁰ Grimaldi, J.V. (2002, July 1). With public notice on first amendment, FDA appears on the verge of major policy shift. *The Washington Post*.

³¹ Grimaldi, J.V. (2002, August 14). Senators criticize FBI, Justice; whistle-blower’s allegations ignored, lawmakers say. *The Washington Post*. p. A09.

³² Grimaldi, J.V. (2002, August 14). Senators criticize FBI, Justice; whistle-blower’s allegations ignored, lawmakers say. *The Washington Post*. p. A09.

“state secrets privilege.” The Department of Justice filed a motion to dismiss Edmonds case out of court because, according to a DoJ press release, “the litigation creates substantial risks in disclosing classified and sensitive national security information that could cause serious damage to our country’s national security.”³³ What the invocation of the state secrets privilege meant for Edmonds was that any information related to her case was considered a national security secret and therefore, it could not be heard in a court proceeding. This action appeared to go far beyond the scope of government protection of sensitive secrets about ongoing investigations or other information that would harm “national security” in the commonly accepted sense of the term. Instead, it appeared to be a blatant effort to keep Edmonds’ case out of court. Whether the motivation behind keeping her case out of court could be found in the Justice Department’s desire to defend itself against the lawsuit or a desire at higher levels in the State Department and Pentagon to keep certain embarrassing information from the public was a question never explored in media coverage over Edmonds.

Edmonds contended that it was the Pentagon pressing for the invocation of the states secret privilege, suggesting the latter motivation was primary. She also claimed that the effort to keep her silent went beyond the gag order. Referring to actions taken by Justice Department officials, at the behest of the Pentagon, Edmonds explained: “That was a coordinated effort. State secrets privilege is one of the things they did. They also went around and put the pressure on my Congressional allies whether in the House or in

³³ Comstock, B. (2002, October 18). Statement of Barbara Comstock, Director of Public Affairs, regarding today’s filing in Sibel Edmonds v. Department of Justice. Retrieved April 10, 2007, from United States Department of Justice Website: <www.usdoj.gov/opa/pr/2002/October/02_ag_605.htm>.

the Senate that I had briefed saying that basically, not a single word about this.”³⁴

In the latter part of 2002, beginning on October 26 and through the winter, six more stories were published after a segment on "60 Minutes" brought the story to television. This was the opportunity for Edmonds to bring her allegations to the public in a big way. The "60 Minutes" segment changed the story somewhat, but unfortunately the program continued to portray her allegations in a way that obscured what she considered her core allegations. Edmonds recounted, "in 60 Minutes, we had a session of an hour, and hour and a half, and of course it was heavily edited and they wanted to focus on the, you know, bureaucratic bungling and bureaucratic incompetence." Rather than reporting the systemic criminality in the State Department and Pentagon that Edmonds emphasized in her interview, "60 Minutes" continued the focus on the FBI itself that the Giraldi piece initiated. This time the FBI was characterized as being too focused on its own growth at the cost of producing sound counterintelligence against terrorism.

Ed Bradley narrated that even though Edmonds was hired almost immediately after the 9/11 attack, "from the day she started the job, she was told repeatedly by one of her supervisors that there was no urgency; that she should take longer to translate documents so that the department would appear overworked and understaffed. That way, it would receive a larger budget for the next year." Edmonds is shown saying, "We were told by our supervisors that this was the great opportunity for asking for increased budget and asking for more translators. And in order to do that, don't do the work and let the documents pile up so we can show it and say that we need more translators and expand

³⁴ Edmonds, Sibel (telephone interview, October 24, 2007)

the department.”³⁵

The segment related Edmonds’ findings to a brief history of problems in the FBI translating materials related to terrorism. Bradley: “In its rush to hire more foreign language translators after September 11th, the FBI admits it has had difficulty performing background checks to detect translators who may have loyalties to other governments, which could pose a threat to US national security.” Continuing, Ed Bradley stated, “Edmonds says that when she reviewed Dickerson’s translations of those tapes, she found that Dickerson had left out information crucial to the FBI’s investigation; information that Edmonds says would have revealed that the Turkish intelligence officer had spies working for him inside the US State Department and the Pentagon.” Although “spies” working in the State Department and Pentagon might seem to be a quite newsworthy part of Edmonds’ claims, it is not explored further. Instead, representations of Edmonds accusations highlighted problems inside the FBI translating intelligence, particularly the intentional slowing of translation work in order to justify more resources for the translation department and the hiring of unqualified translators in the rush to gain more intelligence capabilities after the 9/11 attack. Sibel Edmonds recalls:

They were important issues but compared to why I blew the whistle and what were the issues I went to Congress with...they were not, absolutely not [central issues]. And that was my first and I got a taste of media and I said, ‘Okay, well this is the media’ but millions of people watched that piece and in a way in kind of branded me, okay, there is this whistleblower with backing because even the Senators are confirming her story that has to do with incompetence in the translation department, etc. So that’s how I got branded, with that CBS 60 Minutes piece, which was the biggest media exposure I have had to date. And, as you know, I still waited and I still continued with telling my story, state secrets

³⁵ Bradley, Ed. (Anchor). (2002, October 27). *60 Minutes* [Television broadcast]. Washington, DC: CBS News.

privilege, retroactive classification of Congressional statements, all those things, and got to a point that I said, you know, there is no more as far as the courts are concerned, it's not going anywhere because they're blocking it, they being the Pentagon, the State Department and the Justice Department. And Congress has proven completely useless and then in fact, after a while, they refuse to answer or take your calls, answer your calls. So therefore I will take it upon myself and pursue it as much as I can with the mainstream media...³⁶

Through the winter of 2002, this new aspect of Edmonds' allegations first reported by "60 Minutes" was added to the Post's original portrayal of foreign espionage coupled with a benign conception of a "security laps" that may have "compromised national security".³⁷ During this period, news articles characterized Edmonds as claiming that "she was told by her supervisor to let her work pile up so that the bureau could show that it needs more money,"³⁸ that "documents weren't translated because the division is riddled with incompetence and corruption,"³⁹ that "many documents in terrorism investigations aren't translated because of incompetence and corruption,"⁴⁰ that there is too much "incompetence and corruption in the FBI's translation services,"⁴¹ that "she raised allegations of security lapses in the FBI's translator program,"^{42 43} and that she put forward "allegations rang[ing] from shoddy transcriptions by unqualified translators to suggestions that one interpreter with a relative who works at a foreign embassy may have

³⁶ Edmonds, Sibel (telephone interview, October 24, 2007)

³⁷ Washington in brief. (2002, December 10). *The Washington Post*.

³⁸ Blomquist, B. (2002, October 26). Translator claims work scam at FBI. *The New York Post*.

³⁹ Bradley, Ed. (Anchor). (2002, October 27). *60 Minutes* [Television broadcast]. Washington, DC: CBS News.

⁴⁰ Kurtz, H. (2002, November 4). Mr. Stewart goes to Washington. *The Washington Post*. p. C01.

⁴¹ Eggen, D. (2002, November 11). FBI whistle-blower's case reexamined; charges of continued retaliation referred to inspector general's office. *The Washington Post*.

⁴² Washington in brief. (2002, December 10). *The Washington Post*.

⁴³ Whistleblower wins round against FBI. (2002, December 10). *The San Diego Union-Tribune*.

compromised national security.”⁴⁴ ⁴⁵ It was the FBI as an organization and the one individual co-worker she accused of espionage that were portrayed as the main targets of blame, not the State Department and Pentagon.

After the winter of 2002, the story died for a year and a half except for a Newsweek Magazine article by Michael Isikoff and Daniel Klaidman. This article reproduced the allegations portrayed in previous news but set it within a context that suggested the FBI translation department was riddled with foreign-born Arabic speakers whose loyalty to the United States was in question. Although the FBI was attempting to increase the number of translators, the article states, “The answer is not to open the door to just any Arabic speaker.”⁴⁶ Although this article set itself apart as a unique distortion of her claims, it continued the same focus upon the FBI as a dysfunctional (but legitimate) organization.

Phase Two: April 2004 - December 2006

After the trickle of news regarding Edmonds in 2002, little is heard about her until about a year and a half later in April of 2004 when there is a tremendous surge of articles. How Edmonds’ claims were presented in this new phase of coverage began with an entirely different set of allegations within a new political context.

After her whistleblower case was shut down in 2002 under a gag order issued by the Justice Department, there was one more legal opportunity for Edmonds findings to

⁴⁴ Washington in brief. (2002, December 10). *The Washington Post*.

⁴⁵ Whistleblower wins round against FBI. (2002, December 10). *The San Diego Union Tribune*.

⁴⁶ Isikoff, M. & Klaidman, D. (2003, October 27). Lost in translation. *Newsweek*. p. 26.

come out in court. In addition to the class action lawsuit against Saudi banks, charities, and businesses filed in 2002, another class action lawsuit filed on behalf of hundreds of 9/11 families subpoenaed Edmonds in 2004. The investigators for the law firm Motley Rice wanted to find out what Edmonds knew about accusations that international banks and foreign government officials aided al Qaeda. The London Independent reported that Edmonds was to testify regarding her allegations that she “had seen information proving there was considerable evidence before September 2001 that al-Qaeda was planning to strike the US with aircraft.”⁴⁷ Again, Ashcroft exercised the state secrets privilege, barring Edmonds from making any deposition.

Focus shifts from the FBI to the Bush Administration

The Independent of London broke these new set of allegations amid the summer’s controversy over the handling of pre-9/11 intelligence by the White House. The Bush administration was under attack by political adversaries questioning its competency to fight the “war on terror.” In the lead up to the 2004 congressional elections, many Democratic politicians were hopping on this line of criticism while Republicans insisted that the intelligence warnings were only very general and that terrorists slipped through the cracks because of too much “political correctness” and bureaucratic rules hampering the operations of intelligence agencies. Former Counter-terrorism chief Richard Clarke had recently testified in front of the 9/11 Commission, saying that the White House had missed opportunities to prevent the attack and apologized to the families of 9/11 victims. Another recent item in the news cycle had been the controversy over the Bush

⁴⁷ Buncombe, A. (2004, April 26). Lawyers try to gag FBI worker over 9/11. *The Independent*. First Edition. Foreign News, p. 26.

administration's resistance to allowing National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice to testify before the commission. Rice defended the administration's competence by stating: "we received no intelligence that terrorists were preparing to attack the homeland using airplanes as missiles."⁴⁸ Edmonds had gone under oath before the commission to address questions over pre-9/11 intelligence, but her testimony was secret. However, after the hearing she told a reporter from the Independent of London that Rice's contention was "an outrageous lie" and that she had seen documents proving that senior officials knew generally of the plan to attack the US with aircraft.

Many other English language newspapers based outside the United States picked up the Independent's lead, contributing to the largest surge in coverage during the entire period Edmonds was in the news from 2002 to 2008. Twelve articles were published between April 2 and April 5, 2004, all in newspapers based in the UK, Australia, and Canada. The Independent went on to publish four more articles referencing Edmonds that month. Interestingly, during the most intense spike in coverage over Edmonds, not one major US newspaper even mentioned her name.

Changing focus away from the dysfunction of the FBI, these allegations were presented as zeroing in on the dysfunctions of the White House, becoming another chapter in the saga over what Bush administration officials knew before 9/11 and how they handled that intelligence. This wave of coverage portrayed Edmonds' allegations mainly as pointing blame at the Bush administration for ignoring terror warnings in the lead up to the 9/11 attack. In the London Independent article that first broke these

⁴⁸ Buncombe, A. (2004, April 2). 'I saw papers that show US knew al Qaeda would attack cities with aeroplanes'; whistleblower the Whitehouse wants to silence speaks to the Independent. *The Independent* (London). Section A, p. 1, 2.

allegations, she is reported to have “provided information [to the 9/11 Commission] proving that months before 9/11 senior officials had general knowledge of al Qa’ida plans to attack the US with aircraft.”⁴⁹ Another British newspaper reported that she contended, “top US officials knew before September 11 that al Qaida planned to use aircraft to commit an outrage.”⁵⁰ In the Guardian, she is quoted saying “there was specific information about the use of airplanes, that an attack was on the way two or three months beforehand and that several people were already in the country by May of 2001.”⁵¹ Another article quoted her as saying that “there was widespread intelligence before 9/11 that al-Qa’ida was planning to attack the US with aircraft.”⁵² Many of the articles made it clear that Edmonds was not claiming that officials had information as to the exact date and time of the attack, but that “there was specific information on the use of airplanes” and that “[t]here were people issuing orders and information on people already in place in this country months before Sept. 11.”⁵³

Early on in coverage over Edmonds, the systemic inefficacy frame was built around accusations aimed at the FBI for mismanagement, bureaucratic bungling, and other problems set at the organizational level. Then, after a long silence, newspapers outside the United States published a huge number of stories covering Edmonds’

⁴⁹ Buncombe, A. (2004, April 2). ‘I saw papers that show US knew al Qa’ida would attack cities with aeroplanes’; whistleblower the Whitehouse wants to silence speaks to the Independent. *The Independent* (London). Section A, p. 1, 2.

⁵⁰ New laws in terror blitz; Blair acts over ‘al Qa’ida plot’. (2004, April 2). *Birmingham Evening Mail*. First Edition. News, p. 4.

⁵¹ Borger, J. (2004, April 2). 9/11 allegations press on Rice from all sides: Undelivered speech and claims of translator fuel row over whether terror threat was taken seriously. *The Guardian*. p. 15.

⁵² Buncombe, A. (2004, April 4). Rice faces quiz on warnings of 9/11 attack. *The Independent*. First Edition. Foreign News, p. 18.

⁵³ Harper, T. (2004, April 5). Ex-FBI worker challenges 9/11 ‘lie’. *Toronto Star*. News, p. A08.

statements that directly contradicted the official story set forward by the White House that pre-9/11 warnings did not consist of any actionable intelligence. It is interesting to note that this shift in coverage was solely carried by newspapers based outside the United States, and that no US paper picked up this story during the course of several weeks while newspapers outside the US presented it as a major story. Perhaps US news organizations decided not to run with these allegations due to fears about state flak. The fact that news organizations outside the United States carried this story but US-based news outlets avoided it entirely gives credence to the hegemonic model of news coverage.

US Media Shifts Blame from the White House Back to the FBI

In April, the state secrets privilege had been invoked to prevent Edmonds from making a deposition for the 9/11 civil suit. International English language newspapers ran stories about this while US news was silent. Several weeks after invoking the state secrets privilege, in mid-May 2004 the Justice Department took the extraordinary step of retroactively classifying the information about Edmonds' case that the FBI had shared with members of the Judiciary Committee in the summer of 2002. These were the documents that indicated Edmonds claims about her co-worker were true. Included in this retroactive classification was also such information as what languages Edmonds spoke, the types of cases she handled, where and with whom she worked. Edmonds joked that her own driver's license was a "classified document."

It had been argued that certain information that Edmonds knew had to be kept a secret for the purpose of protecting methods of data gathering, knowledge of targets, the

identity of informers, or other sensitive information that could disrupt ongoing investigations, but the retroactive classification of documents that were already in the public sphere could not fit that explanation. The effect was that Edmonds' would be barred from bringing her lawsuit against the Justice Department for unlawful termination, nor could she be subpoenaed for testimony in a lawsuit filed by 9/11 families. It appeared to be a blatant attempt to keep inconvenient information out of court. This probably startled even the most jaded political and legal hands.

At this point, the public letters that Grassley and Leahy had sent to Fine, Ashcroft, and Mueller, and published on their websites, were now considered national security secrets. The New York Times reported that both senators promptly removed the materials from their websites after they were sent a memo that it had been re-classified.⁵⁴ Sibel Edmonds wrote of the matter: "This time, he, John Ashcroft, decided to gag the entire Congress...[H]e commanded that they, the Congress, shut their mouth on any issue that in any way referred or related to me. Our senators obliged, disregarding the principles of the separation of powers, not honoring the United States Constitution, and not respecting their own prestige and status. As of that day, the United States Congress became officially gagged."⁵⁵

It was only at this time that the New York Times finally published the first US newspaper article mentioning Edmonds since 2002. This was also the very first mention of Edmonds in the New York Times. It is interesting that no US newspaper mentioned

⁵⁴ Lichtblau, Eric. "Material Given To Congress In 2002 Is Now Classified." The New York Times. 20 May 2004. Lexis-Nexis Academic. University of Missouri-Columbia Lib., 12 April 2007 <proxy.mul.missouri.edu:2084/universe >.

⁵⁵ Edmonds, Sibel. (2005, May 15). Gagged But Not Dead. Retrieved on April 13, 2007, from buzzflash.com: www.buzzflash.com/contributors/05/05/con05170.html

Edmonds' during the spike in coverage occurring outside the United States focusing upon the systemic inefficacies of the Bush Administration. It was only *after* the Bush Administration had its chance to formulate both a rhetorical and legal response to Edmonds' claims that the New York Times decided that her case was news fit to print. This first story published in the US since 2002 and the first story published in the New York Times was entitled "Material Given to Congress in 2002 is Now Classified."

New York Times reporter Eric Lichtblau wrote that "law enforcement officials" stated it was necessary to classify information related to Edmonds case because it "could reveal intelligence-gathering operations."⁵⁶ The reasoning did not really make sense, considering the fact that this information was already in the public sphere, published in previous newspaper articles and broadcast nationwide on "60 Minutes." Republican Judiciary Committee member Chuck Grassley, referring to the Justice Department's move to retroactively classify these materials, is quoted in the article saying, "...it looks like an attempt to cover up the FBI's problems in translating intelligence."⁵⁷ Despite the rather obvious attempt by the White House to prevent previously public material from being admitted into the discovery phase of the class action lawsuit on behalf of 9/11 families, the target of attribution for Edmonds' claims shifted from the earlier focus upon the Bush Administration during the news surge that had occurred outside the US the month before, back down to the level of the FBI. With focus back on the level of the FBI itself, the Bush administration could easily fit this within their campaign to give law enforcement and intelligence agencies more powers at the cost of civil liberties.

⁵⁶ Lichtblau, E. (2004, May 20). Material given to Congress in 2002 is now classified. *New York Times*. Section A, p. 18.

⁵⁷ Lichtblau, E. (2004, May 20). Material given to Congress in 2002 is now classified. *New York Times*. Section A, p. 18.

By this time, Edmonds' actual allegations began to solidify into the background. This New York Times article concentrated on Edmonds' wrongful termination lawsuit and the actions taken by the government to impede the proceedings while the allegations that got her canned in the first place are simply relayed from how they had been represented as in 2002. Edmonds is said to have "charged that the FBI's translation services were plagued by incompetence and a lack of urgency," and "made increasingly vehement charges about the FBI's intelligence failures."⁵⁸ The article builds up this frame by stating that "The FBI has taken steps to improve its translation operations, including hiring more linguists." The specter of something more than mere organizational dysfunction is not explored or even acknowledged.

The Justice Department argued that the extraordinary measure to retroactively classify information was necessary to protect the integrity of ongoing investigations and not reveal methods of gathering data. The main opposing viewpoint featured in the news was one that claimed the FBI actually just wanted to protect itself from embarrassment.

Speaking of this New York Times article in the interview I conducted with Edmonds, she relates:

The first time they [the New York Times] touched it was with the retroactive classification, it was by Lichtblau [...] This is what I keep telling people: Any journalist good or bad should say, why would they go out of their way gagging this woman and gagging the Congress, which is unprecedented. What is it that she knows? If I'm a journalist, that would be the first thing motivating me to really go and chase the story because, name one whistleblower, Ryan, including Colleen Rowley, including anybody, name one case that you know where the entire Congress is being officially gagged on [...] Someone who is there for six or seven months - not an agent, not an operative, not an informant, but just a translator - become the most gagged person in the history of the US. [...] Why

⁵⁸ Lichtblau, E. (2004, May 20). Material given to Congress in 2002 is now classified. *New York Times*. Section A, p. 18.

gag the Congress, why retroactively classify all the stuff from congressional records, why invoke the state secrets privilege twice? Why? To answer that question, that's what I want the journalists to do only [...] I would dare anyone to go and check the media and see if anyone has said some question like this for why are they invoking the state secrets privilege on this woman's case who was there for only six, seven months. [...] Go to the mainstream media and look [...] They don't say why. They don't even raise the question why.⁵⁹

The month after the retroactive classifications of materials that were already in the public sphere, in June of 2004, the United States District Court followed Ashcroft's pronouncement of "state secrets" and dismissed Edmonds' case. What were those secrets? Were they legitimate? Edmonds is right: the question of why she was gagged to such an extent was never explored, other than relaying the Justice Departments' own reasoning that it was necessary to protect "state secrets." This again appears to be an example of news media relying upon official sources, not just for inside information but also for interpretation. According to professional standards, it is totally expected that the news media would relay the official reasoning for why state secrets had been invoked, but to leave that looming question hanging with such an insufficient justification is completely unfathomable if professional standards and ethics are the factors which decide the composition of the news. One would also expect the issue of state secrets to be extremely sensational and potentially profitable under the market model of news production. The fact that no mainstream news outlets approached questions around state secrets with any depth or scope can be explained only by the hegemonic model of news production. It appears that the elite newspaper the New York Times, with access to official sources, published the breaking story relaying the official explanation of why state secrets was invoked. Then, other news outlets simply copied the New York Times

⁵⁹ Edmonds, Sibel (telephone interview, October 24, 2007)

scoop without adding any new angles or bringing in any other alternative perspectives.

Edmonds' lawsuit charging the FBI with wrongful termination for her whistleblowing activities and the pattern of government classification of materials related to her case based on the "state secrets privilege" soon became a major news story. The next few months involved the largest amount of sustained coverage over Edmonds. Between June and September of 2004, thirty news items were produced that mentioned Edmonds name. This comprised one third of all news items in the data set produced during the entire period between 2002 and 2008.

The allegations that got her fired in the first place were no longer explored. They became assumed largely within the systemic inefficacy frame, a part of the background of these stories as they reported each new update in Edmonds' legal case. Even when items surfaced that appeared to be highly critical of the government's resistance to Edmonds' whistleblower lawsuit, they still fell far short of representing the counter-hegemonic aspects of Edmonds' core allegations. With the focus on government resistance to her lawsuit, Edmonds' allegations themselves were left unexplored. While highly critical of the Justice Department's efforts to keep the case out of court, these stories portrayed Edmonds allegations in a way that dismissed the most ominous aspects of her claims – those that emphasized systemic iniquities. For example, on June 15, 2004, columnist Paul Krugman wrote an opinion piece in the *New York Times* (and *International Herald Tribune*) entitled "Travesty of Justice."⁶⁰ This piece represents the limits of how far the press would go to criticize the handling of Edmonds' case. In it Krugman was extremely critical of Ashcroft for his invocation of the state secrets privilege, asserting that he was

⁶⁰ Krugman, P. (2004, June 15). Travesty of justice (Editorial). *New York Times*. Section A, p. 23.

“aggressively uninterested in the terrorist threat” before 9/11 and had done little in the “fight against terror” after 9/11. Krugman used Edmonds’ case as an example of how “Mr. Aschroft shuts down public examination.” Combining the 2002 portrayal of Edmonds claims along with the new focus on pre-9/11 intelligence, Krugman referred to Edmonds as “a former FBI translator who says that the agency’s language division is riddled with incompetence and corruption, and that the bureau missed critical terrorist warnings.” Even a liberal columnist like Krugman, who we would expect to like nothing better than an opportunity to blast the neoconservative network, ignored Edmonds’ core allegations that members of this group occupying top levels in the State Department and Pentagon were selling state secrets. If Krugman would have bothered to check any of Edmonds’ statements she published on her own website, or interviews she had done with citizen-reporters on the blogosphere, he would have known that incompetence and corruption in the FBI’s translation department were the least of her allegations. Instead, Krugman simply relayed Edmonds’ allegations according to how the elite press portrayed them.

As illustrated by Krugman’s piece, systemic inefficacy within the FBI was the primary characterization of Edmonds claims during this period. Information about Edmonds’ case that was classified by the Justice Department, one article stated, “center[s] on claims made by a former FBI linguist about bureau problems in translating terrorism material.”⁶¹ She is said to have been “fired from her FBI linguist job after complaining that the translation unit where she worked was mishandling important

⁶¹ Lichtblau, E. (2004, June 24). National briefing Washington: Suit over classified data. *New York Times*. Section A, p. 16.

information.”⁶² Mainly, her allegations were portrayed as criticizing the FBI for system-wide ineptitude. Edmonds is referred to as “a fired FBI whistleblower who found evidence of a cover-up of FBI incompetence that imperils national security,”⁶³ and was fired “in part because she accused the bureau of ineptitude”⁶⁴ and raising “troubling questions about FBI competence.”⁶⁵ More specifically, this ineptitude included “bad management”⁶⁶ or “management problems”⁶⁷ and “security lapses”^{68 69 70} or “lax security”⁷¹ within the translation department resulting in the hiring of unqualified translators^{72 73 74 75} who produced “sloppy,”^{76 77 78} “slipshod,”^{79 80 81} or “shoddy”^{82 83 84}

⁶² Washington in brief. (2004, June 24). *Washington Post*. Section A, p. 04.

⁶³ Hentoff, N. (2004, July 26). Injustice: Sweet land of liberty. *The Washington Post*. (Op-ed). p. A19.

⁶⁴ Lichtblau, E. (2004, July 29). Whistleblowing said to be a factor in an FBI firing. *The New York Times*. Section A, p. 1.

⁶⁵ An FBI in denial. [Editorial]. (2004, August 9). *Boston Globe*. p. A10.

⁶⁶ Foreman, T. & Zahn, P. [Hosts]. (2004, August 17). *Paula Zahn Now* [Television broadcast]. Cable News Network.

⁶⁷ Foreman, T. & Zahn, P. [Hosts]. (2004, August 17). *Paula Zahn Now* [Television broadcast]. Cable News Network.

⁶⁸ Kornblut, A. (2004, July 5). Translator in eye of storm on retroactive classification. *Boston Globe*. p. A1.

⁶⁹ Washington in brief. (2004, September 23). *The Washington Post*. p. A12.

⁷⁰ Seper, J. (2004, July 30). Classified reports supports FBI whistleblower. *The Washington Times*. p. A03.

⁷¹ Foreman, T. & Zahn, P. [Hosts]. (2004, August 17). *Paula Zahn Now* [Television broadcast]. Cable News Network.

⁷² Foreman, T. & Zahn, P. [Hosts]. (2004, August 17). *Paula Zahn Now* [Television broadcast]. Cable News Network.

⁷³ Foreman, T. & Zahn, P. [Hosts]. (2004, August 17). *Paula Zahn Now* [Television broadcast]. Cable News Network.

⁷⁴ Norville, D. [Host]. (2004, August 18). *Deborah Norville Tonight*. [Television broadcast]. MSNBC. FDCHMedia, Inc.

⁷⁵ Foreman, T. & Zahn, P. [Hosts]. (2004, August 17). *Paula Zahn Now* [Television broadcast]. Cable News Network.

⁸⁵ translations.

The slowing of translation work by Edmonds' supervisor in order to justify a larger budget for the translation department is also featured during this period as a part of the organizational dysfunction frame. "[S]he was told to do her work slowly so that the FBI could get a bigger budget to hire more translators."⁸⁶ Paula Zahn stated that Edmonds "says that in her department, getting the work done was not as high a priority as getting more money from Congress"⁸⁷ and Deborah Norville stated that Edmonds said "there was a deliberate effort to undo work that had been done and to slow the process for budget reasons."⁸⁸

⁷⁶ Seper, J. (2004, July 30). Classified reports supports FBI whistleblower. *The Washington Times*. p. A03.

⁷⁷ Seper, J. (2004, July 30). Classified reports supports FBI whistleblower. *The Washington Times*. p. A03.

⁷⁸ Translator a profile in courage. (2004, July 13). *The Boston Globe*. Letters, p. A12.

⁷⁹ Lichtblau, E. (2004, August 2). Another FBI employee blows whistle on agency. *The New York Times*. Section A, p. 15.

⁸⁰ Seper, J. (2004, July 30). Classified reports supports FBI whistleblower. *The Washington Times*. p. A03.

⁸¹ Lichtblau, E. (2004, July 29). Whistleblowing said to be a factor in an FBI firing. *The New York Times*. Section A, p. 1.

⁸² Washington in brief. (2004, July 7). *Washington Post*. p. A08.

⁸³ Buncombe, A. (2004, July 12). Pandora in America. *The Independent*. First Edition, p. 12.

⁸⁴ Translator a profile in courage. (2004, July 13). *The Boston Globe*. Letters, p. A12.

⁸⁵ Rennie, D. (2004, September 29). Linguists urgently needed by FBI: Arabic and Farsi speaker: Thousands of hours of al-Qaeda-related talks waiting to be translated. *The Daily Telegraph*. p. A16.

⁸⁶ Hentoff, N. (2004, July 26). Injustice: Sweet land of liberty. *The Washington Post*. (Op-ed). p. A19.

⁸⁷ Foreman, T. & Zahn, P. [Hosts]. (2004, August 17). *Paula Zahn Now* [Television broadcast]. Cable News Network.

⁸⁸ Norville, D. [Host]. (2004, August 18). *Deborah Norville Tonight*. [Television

After organizational ineptitude of the FBI, espionage by her co-worker was the next major portrayal of Edmonds' allegations during the summer and early fall of 2004, a period of time in which one third of the news items about Edmonds was produced. "Sibel Edmonds, a former FBI linguist, says she was fired in 2002 after complaining of shoddy work in the translation unit and possible espionage."⁸⁹ ⁹⁰ Edmonds was reported to have been fired after she "told [her supervisors that] an interpreter with a relative at a foreign embassy might have compromised national security,"⁹¹ that she "revealed to her superiors that one of her colleagues was involved with an organization under FBI surveillance"⁹² and was intentionally blocking or mistranslating wiretaps related to this target. In another instance, an article in the Boston Globe reported that Edmonds discovered that her colleague was a "member of an organization with ties to the Middle East that was a target of an FBI investigation"⁹³ even though by now the American Turkish Council had already been named in some places in the mainstream media. The blockage of intelligence could have been characterized as systemic if it had been specified as being managed on a broad scale going beyond her co-worker's individual actions, as Edmonds had described, but the FBI and other government institutions were not portrayed as taking part in the protection and cover-up of these blockages for any reason other than

broadcast]. MSNBC. FDCHeMedia, Inc.

⁸⁹ Rennie, D. (2004, September 29). Linguists urgently needed by FBI: Arabic and Farsi speaker: Thousands of hours of al-Qaeda-related talks waiting to be translated. *The Daily Telegraph*. p. A16.

⁹⁰ Lichtblau, E. (2004, September 28). FBI said to lag on translation of terror tapes. *The New York Times*. Section A, p. 1.

⁹¹ Washington in brief. (2004, July 7). *Washington Post*. p. A08.

⁹² Hentoff, N. (2004, July 26). Injustice: Sweet land of liberty. *The Washington Post*. (Op-ed). p. A19.

⁹³ Kornblut, A. (2004, July 5). Translator in eye of storm on retroactive classification. *Boston Globe*. p. A1.

incompetence and embarrassment for such a “security lapse.”

The issue of pre-9/11 intelligence was also a major component of the way Edmonds’ allegations were presented during this period. The target of these accusations was largely defined as the FBI, with the State Department, Pentagon, and other government institutions left out of the story. An illustrative example is how Deborah Norville introduced Edmonds, as “an FBI translator who put her career on the line and came forward to report how the FBI dropped the ball in tracking terror leads before 9/11.”⁹⁴ Two separate articles used the same sentence to describe what Edmonds had found: “Intercepts relevant to the terrorist plot, including references to skyscrapers, had been overlooked because they were badly translated into English.”^{95 96}

From reading news articles during this period, one gathers that the FBI had “overlooked” these translations apparently because of the incompetence of individual translators who were hired without ensuring that they were properly qualified or because the FBI was hampered by too many rules and regulations preventing it from effectively triangulating the vast amount of intelligence data passing through it. The latter was a favorite interpretation of Edmonds story by conservatives whose agenda was to expand police powers at the cost of civil liberties. From this perspective, legal constraints over the FBI and an atmosphere of “political correctness” lead to its failure to prevent 9/11.

For example, on CNN’s “Paula Zahn Now” former Assistant Director of the FBI

⁹⁴ Norville, D. [Host]. (2004, August 18). *Deborah Norville Tonight*. [Television broadcast]. MSNBC. FDCHeMedia, Inc.

⁹⁵ Kornblut, A. (2004, July 5). Translator in eye of storm on retroactive classification. *Boston Globe*. p. A1.

⁹⁶ Hentoff, N. (2004, July 26). Injustice: Sweet land of liberty. *The Washington Post*. (Op-ed). p. A19.

states:

“We have glaring deficiencies in our system. We’ve got an FBI the morning of 9/11 had a straightjacket on. [...] We didn’t take this seriously, although many in the FBI did, myself included, for two decades. I can tell you there’s a lot of patriotic – thousands of people that work long hours to do the job. And when you don’t have the tools to do that, prior to the Patriot Act, the common sense is to give them the tools to do their job.”⁹⁷

Interestingly, I could not find any statement Edmonds ever made suggesting that too many rules hampered the FBI from properly analyzing intelligence information. On the MSNBC program “Deborah Norville Tonight,” Edmonds is asked whether she saw evidence that could have prevented the 9/11 attack if it had been available to agents. She answers, “Yes, several specific cases.” She indicated that in fact, this information *had* been made available to agents: “[T]his information was received in April, 2001. And it was given to the special agent in charge of counter-terrorism.”⁹⁸ It was blockage at the top level which prevented the information from being used to stop the attack, Edmonds suggests, not incompetence among translators or too many rules hampering the triangulation of information.

Containment of corruption allegations

A few times throughout this period, “corruption” was added to the list of Edmonds allegations. For example, the London Independent stated that Edmonds was “fired from her job as a translator because of allegations she made about the bureau’s

⁹⁷ Foreman, T. & Zahn, P. [Hosts]. (2004, August 17). *Paula Zahn Now* [Television broadcast]. Cable News Network.

⁹⁸ Norville, D. [Host]. (2004, August 18). *Deborah Norville Tonight*. [Television broadcast]. MSNBC. FDCHeMedia, Inc.

inefficiency and corruption”⁹⁹ and Deborah Norville stated, “Sibel Edmonds lost her job in March of 2002, when she blew the whistle and said that documents had not been translated because of incompetence and corruption.”¹⁰⁰ One might assume that the revelation of corruption is a counter-hegemonic representation of Edmonds’ claims, but in the context of these articles it was far from it.

Corruption can occur individually or systemically. While Edmonds pointed toward the corruption of her co-worker who was actively blocking intelligence gathering, more importantly, she pointed toward the corruption of an entire intelligence apparatus going beyond just the FBI that was involved in managing the analysis of intelligence data so as to protect illegal operations being carried out by top State Department and Pentagon officials. What would be considered more newsworthy according to the professional criteria of newsworthiness: corruption by a few low-level workers or the corruption of high-level officials and an entire institution? This latter part, what Edmonds considered the core of her allegations, were not even implied in these articles. Instead, “corruption” was left largely unexplored. In the context of news about Edmonds allegations that emphasized ineptitude as a system-wide problem in the FBI, it is easy to assume that the unexplained “corruption” mentioned in these stories refers to the individual corruption of her co-worker engaged in espionage and perhaps the individual corruption of her supervisor who was slowing work to justify a larger budget for the translation department “Corruption” was characterized as emanating from low-level individuals inside the FBI translation department rather than a system-wide problem going beyond the FBI taking

⁹⁹ Buncombe, A. (2004, July 30). Whistleblower fired over attack on FBI criticism. *The Independent*. P. 36.

¹⁰⁰ Norville, D. [Host]. (2004, August 18). *Deborah Norville Tonight*. [Television broadcast]. MSNBC. FDCHeMedia, Inc.

place at high levels in the White House, Justice Department, State Department, and Pentagon. Again, the hegemonic model of news production best fit how Edmonds' allegations were covered.

The first instance of a systemic iniquity frame

One commentary published during the summer did in fact portray systemic iniquity as the main component of Edmonds' allegations, and this was the first time since Edmonds went public that a major news organization produced an item that presented such claims. Not surprisingly, this was a British newspaper, not an US-based news organization. On July 22, 2004, on page 23 the Guardian published a commentary written by Michael Meacher, Labor Party MP for Oldham West and Royton and former Environmental Minister entitled "The Pakistan Connection: There is Evidence of Foreign Intelligence Backing of the 9/11 Hijackers. Why is the US Government so Keen to Cover it Up?"¹⁰¹ From the title alone, we can gather that this commentary claims that the US government was acting to repress evidence of the involvement of Pakistani intelligence services in the 9/11 attack. The reason for such a cover up is attributed to attempts by the US government to conceal its clandestine relationship with the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) in the funding and support of militant Islamic groups in the region before and after the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The column presents a very different picture of what was going on than what was portrayed in all stories up to this point, as well as almost all of the stories published after. In this story, Sibel Edmonds is just one piece of a larger story about US government actions to cover up

¹⁰¹ Meacher, M. (2004, July 22). Comment & Analysis: The Pakistan Connection: There is evidence of foreign intelligence backing for the 9/11 hijackers. Why is the US government so keen to cover it up? *The Guardian*. p. 23

activities that would likely be condemned by the public.

Meacher begins by discussing Omar Sheikh, who was about to be executed by the Pakistani government for the murder of journalist Daniel Pearl. Omar Sheikh is also the same person who wired 9/11 ringleader Mohammed Atta \$100,000 at the behest of General Ahmed, head of Pakistani intelligence services. One may recall that General Ahmed had come to Washington to visit with State Department, CIA, and Pentagon officials just prior to the September 11 attack (and on the morning of the attack was at a breakfast meeting with Senator Bob Graham and Rep. Porter Goss, chairmen of the Senate and House Intelligence Committees). New evidence had come forth that Pakistani officials were involved in the murder of Daniel Pearl, but these officials had not been tried in court or even questioned by law-enforcement.

What was going on? The Guardian asks, "Why hasn't the US demanded that these officials be questioned and tried in court?" The Guardian points to the protection of sensitive information as one explanation why Omar Sheikh is taking the fall for Daniel Pearl's murder while many other Pakistani officials deserve attention. Meacher quotes speculation by Daniel Ellsberg suggesting that Pearl had been investigating the role of the United States in training and backing the Pakistani Intelligence Services.

Ellsberg is quoted saying, "To say Pakistan is, to me, to say CIA because . . . it's hard to say that the ISI knew something that the CIA had no knowledge of." The Guardian reports that Ahmed worked closely with the CIA when the agency "used the ISI as a conduit to pump billions of dollars into militant Islamist groups in Afghanistan, both before and after the Soviet invasion of 1979." The story goes on: "The case of Ahmed confirms that parts of the ISI directly supported and financed al-Qaida, and it has long

been established that the ISI has acted as a go-between in intelligence operation on behalf of the CIA."

The article then proceeds to cite a laundry list of incidents in which the United States government acted in bizarre ways to protect the intelligence and national security establishment from prying eyes, such as when the CIA did not allow top al Qaeda lieutenants to testify at the trial of Zacarias Moussaoui in order to protect "state secrets" and when two alleged conspirators were let go in Germany for the same reason. One of the examples is the case of Sibel Edmonds: "She has been quoted as saying: 'My translations of the 9/11 intercepts included (terrorist) money laundering, detailed and date-specific information . . . if they were to do real investigations, we would see several significant high-level criminal prosecutions in this country (the US) . . . and believe me, they will do everything to cover this up.'" The linking of Edmonds story to other instances of inexplicable state secrecy identifies an overall pattern of illegitimate secrecy in the US security establishment in contradiction to public interest.

This article portrayed Edmonds' allegations in terms of systemic iniquity, contrasting with other articles' picture of organizational dysfunction, incompetence, benign neglect, "shoddy translations," lack of professionalism, foreign espionage, and mere individual criminality. Other items in major news until this point had dealt with the issue of government secrecy but they had all portrayed it as stemming from overzealousness, a culture of secrecy, attempts to hide incompetence, the cover up of individual corruption, or genuine efforts by the government to protect "national security." Meacher, however, represented the issue of government secrecy as a problem attributed to the cover up of information that would expose a systematic pattern of US government

activities many in the general public would consider morally reprehensible. This portrayal of Edmonds' allegations went far beyond questions of systemic inefficacy into the territory of systemic iniquity.

Another commentary written in the spring of 2004 also highlighted systemic iniquity as a part of Edmonds claims. Like the only other item that portrayed Edmonds' allegations in terms of systemic iniquity, it was an opinion piece published in a British newspaper, in this instance the *Observer*.¹⁰² Again, Edmonds' case was used as an example of government corruption fit within the context of a broader picture of illegitimate state secrecy. The commentary was written by Katherine Gun, a British whistleblower who exposed US plans to bug the UN in order to gain advantages in the press for war against Iraq. She writes about the difficulty she went through in her experience working for the Government Communications Headquarters. She relates meeting Edmonds during a whistleblower symposium. "It was during that visit that I met former FBI employees Coleen Rowley and Sibel Edmonds, Major Frank Grevil from the Danish intelligence community and others who have spoken out about the abuses, cover-ups and lies that our respective governments have peddled before and after the invasion of Iraq. She argues that trust in government secrecy is naïve because it assumes that 'our government representatives are always, without a shadow of a doubt, in the right; that they are always acting in our best interests, that they are always behaving in accordance with national and international law.'" Gun did not go into details of Edmonds' case, but

¹⁰² Bright, M. (2004, September 19). Follow my lead, says whistleblower: Katherine Gun, who exposed the UN bugging affair, has founded a truth-telling squad. *The Observer*. p. 11.

very generally set her allegations in terms of systemic iniquity. In contrast to preceding news items that assumed the invocation of state secrets was either to cover up incompetence or to legitimately protect state secrets, this opinion piece framed Edmonds' allegation in terms of systemic iniquity, contending that the secrecy was due to cover up of something more sinister than simply incompetence or systemic ineptitude.

By now the counter-hegemonic aspects of Edmonds claims had been articulated in the news, but only very generally. These commentaries in British papers were a small island in an ocean of stories. Clearly, they had no effect on the way other stories presented Edmonds' claims during the period. Even other British newspapers steered clear of the way the Guardian represented Edmonds' allegations in this one commentary, even the Guardian itself in other stories. News organizations continued to make statements declaring that Edmonds had made allegations about ineptitude, inefficiency, and individual corruption. It is evident that the British news system was more open to the inclusion of systemic iniquity frames targeting the US government, but this inclusion did not comprise a significant portion of coverage and was limited to commentaries only. Again, support for the hegemonic model of news production in the US news system is apparent because these instances of the systemic iniquity frame were limited to news outlets based outside of the United States that were less likely to suffer from state flak.

During this period the Department of Justice Office of the Inspector General had announced the conclusion of its investigation, initiated two years before, into how the FBI handled Edmonds' reports. By this time, it was probably not surprising to many when Ashcroft immediately ordered the entire DoJ OIG report classified. Sibel Edmonds comments: "The so called independent investigatory entity, the Inspector General,

wrapped and duct taped its report, bowed, and left the scene.”¹⁰³ Edmonds had been shut out of court, 9/11 families were kept from finding out what she knew about government foreknowledge, congressional officials were forced to keep secret what had already been made public, and finally, the Office of the Inspector General’s report on the matter was sealed in the name of national security.

Vindication? Focus now on Individual Iniquity – Espionage by Co-worker

The extraordinary use of the state secrets privilege worried civil liberties activists, and the American Civil Liberties Union took up Edmonds’ cause. The ACLU appealed the District of Columbia Circuit Court July 2004 decision to dismiss the case on the grounds of state secrets and filed to reinstate Edmonds’ lawsuit against the government. In January of 2005, after a struggle, the OIG report that Ashcroft had classified in the summer of 2004 was partly declassified. What was left of it after it had been redacted still gave support to Edmonds credibility.

After the huge surge of sustained news coverage during the summer of 2004, news around Edmonds stopped until it made a small spike in January of 2005. Elite newspapers the New York Times, Washington Post, and London Independent all published articles on the same day, as well as the Washington Times. What had triggered this sudden appearance of Edmonds’ back in the news was the release of a summary of a one hundred-page classified report on Edmonds’ case issued in July by the Justice Department’s Office of the Inspector General investigating whether Edmonds had been

¹⁰³ Edmonds, Sibel. (2005, May 15). Gagged But Not Dead. Retrieved on April 13, 2007, from buzzflash.com: www.buzzflash.com/contributors/05/05/con05170.html

fired for her whistleblowing activities. This report was portrayed as having vindicated Edmonds or at least having contributed to her credibility. The Washington Times' story was entitled "Whistleblower of FBI Vindicated" but these articles illustrate a process of selective vindication in which Edmonds' allegations were defined by official sources, supporting the hegemony model in which dependence on official sources is a factor that influences news production.

These articles concluded that the summary of this report indicated that Edmonds was indeed fired for her complaints, and that the FBI did not go far enough to investigate these complaints. If the Bureau had properly investigated these allegations, then the FBI would have found "omissions and inaccuracies" that should have led to further investigation. The Washington Post stands out among the rest of the articles in that it goes only as far as stating that Edmonds was fired "in part" because of her complaints. It adds to the list of reasons for her firing, stating that Inspector General Glenn Fine's report "reveals for the first time that Edmonds was fired for violating classified information rules by typing up one memorandum on her home computer."¹⁰⁴ On the whole, however, these articles supported the contention that Edmonds was wrongfully terminated for her whistleblowing activities. Inspector General Glenn Fine is quoted in the Washington Times, saying that "The FBI's failure to handle her allegations adequately contributed to Edmonds' increasingly vociferous complaints, which ultimately led to the termination of her services."

What were these complaints? Another quote from Glenn Fine defines these allegations, stating that Edmonds had been fired "in large part because of her allegations

¹⁰⁴ Eggen, D. (2005, January 15). Official faults FBI probe of translator's complaint. *The Washington Post*. p. A13.

of misconduct.”¹⁰⁵ At this point in time, the portrayal of Edmonds’ allegations shifted away from the systemic inefficacy of the FBI featured earlier in the summer of 2004, to emphasize the individual iniquity of her co-worker whom she accused of engaging in espionage. According to the Washington Post, “she alleged that a Turkish American co-worker had attempted to censor translations of wiretapped conversations, alerted some targets that they were under surveillance and attempted to recruit her into a group that was under investigation.”¹⁰⁶ The New York Times reported that she made allegations of “espionage and ineptitude,” and that a fellow linguist had “blocked the translation of material involving foreign acquaintances.”¹⁰⁷ The same claims highlighted in the summer were still included, but this time the allegations of espionage by her co-worker took the front seat.

What was the validity of these allegations? In the Washington Post article written by Justice Department beat reporter Dan Eggen, it was reported that the OIG investigation did not assess the validity Edmonds’ allegations. Even so it is reported that while there were no final conclusions, the investigation “in fact found that some of them were not supported by the evidence.” At the same time, the Washington Times reported that the summary of the secret OIG report issued in July declare that Edmonds’ accusations about “suspected security breaches and misconduct in the bureau’s post-September 11 foreign language translation program ‘had some basis in fact’ and were

¹⁰⁵ Seper, J. (2005, January 15). Whistleblower of FBI vindicated. *The Washington Times*. p. A02.

¹⁰⁶ Eggen, D. (2005, January 15). Official faults FBI probe of translator’s complaint. *The Washington Post*. p. A13.

¹⁰⁷ Lichtblau, E. (2005, January 15). Inspector General rebukes FBI over espionage case and firing of whistle-blower. *The New York Times*. Section A, p. 8.

supported by documents and other witnesses.”¹⁰⁸ The London Independent paraphrased IG Glenn Fine saying that “accusations made by Mrs. Edmonds relating to poor standards in the FBI’s translation department and possible espionage were supported in the findings.”¹⁰⁹

Apparently, by conceding to the most innocuous components of Edmonds’ claims, the OIG report appeared to support Edmonds’ while containing the counter-hegemonic aspects of her claim. If the summary of this report and the statements made by the Inspector General and FBI Director Mueller to the media were not intentional strategies of damage control aimed at containing Edmonds’ allegations, they still served the purpose well.

Edmonds shut out of court in the name of “diplomatic sensitivities”

In February of 2005, Justice Department lawyers filed a brief requesting that Edmonds appeal be dismissed because it could not continue without causing, in their words, “significant damage to the national security and foreign policy of the United States.”¹¹⁰ Finally the day that Edmonds and her lawyers would get a hearing came in April 2005 before the Appellate Court. Hours before the hearing the judges ruled that reporters and the public would be barred from the courtroom. According to Sibel Edmonds, news organizations had challenged this ruling but “[t]he judges denied their

¹⁰⁸ Seper, J. (2005, January 15). Whistleblower of FBI vindicated. *The Washington Times*. p. A02.

¹⁰⁹ Files, J. (2005, February 26). Justice dept opposes bid to revive case against FBI. *The New York Times*. Section A, p. 9.

¹¹⁰ Files, J. (2005, February 26). Justice dept opposes bid to revive case against FBI. *The New York Times*. Section A, p. 9.

motion, and cited no reason; when asked for a reason they responded that they didn't have to provide any reason."¹¹¹

In her public statement entitled "Gagged but not Dead," Edmonds gives a chilling account of the courtroom experience. It is easy to see why she calls her experience, "Kafkaesque":

Everyone was kicked out of the courtroom; except for me, my attorneys, and the large troop of attorneys from the Department of Justice. All the doors to the courtroom were locked and guards were placed in front of each door to watch out for eavesdroppers. Then came the next shock: after bypassing our brief, asking a couple of puzzling and irrelevant questions, and allowing my attorneys 10 minutes or so of response, the Appellate judges asked my attorneys and me (the plaintiff) to leave the courtroom, so that the government attorneys could secretly answer questions and make their argument. The guards escorted us, the plaintiff, out, locked the doors, and stood there in front of the courtroom and watched us for about fifteen minutes. So much for finally having my day in court; here I was, with my attorneys, standing outside the courtroom and being guarded, while in there, three judges were having a cozy mingling session with a large troop of government attorneys. Then, it was over; that was it; we were told to leave. In other words, my attorneys and I were barred from being present in our own court hearing, and my case remained covered up and gagged.¹¹²

Not surprisingly, the judges ruled to uphold the District Court's previous ruling, rejecting her appeal. The scandalous nature of what had happened could not have been lost on the reporters who were present, though it would not be apparent from the articles they wrote about the ordeal. Outside the courthouse after the hearing in which Edmonds and her lawyers were barred from the courtroom, she told reporters:

When the Attorney General came, initially, and invoked the state secrets privilege, okay, he decided two reasons: to protect certain sensitive diplomatic relations and to protect certain foreign business relations of the United States.

¹¹¹ Edmonds, Sibel. "Gagged But Not Dead." *BuzzFlash*. Retrieved April 13, 2007, from <www.buzzflash.com/contributors/05/05/con05170.html>

¹¹² Edmonds, Sibel. "Gagged But Not Dead." *BuzzFlash*. Retrieved April 13, 2007, from <www.buzzflash.com/contributors/05/05/con05170.html>

Now, they are saying, that whole information, everything, is classified. We don't know what diplomatic relations they are referring to. They must be ashamed of it because they don't mention it. So we have certain diplomatic relations that prevents criminals from being prosecuted, you know, here. And I'm talking about the criminals in the United States of America, American citizens. I'm not referring to only foreigners.¹¹³

In the name of national security, however, the matter was suspended. During the rest of 2005 and 2006, many more stories were produced about the ups and down, mostly downs, of Edmonds' whistleblower lawsuit. They continued to mainly portray Edmonds' allegations in terms of the systemic inefficacy of organizational dysfunction in the FBI or simply the individual iniquity of the co-worker she accused of engaging in espionage. It seemed as though no matter what steps the government took to keep Edmonds quiet, journalists dug no further into her claims than looking at each others' stories. All they would have had to do was go to her website, or ask her. They probably did, but it did not seem to matter.

What was perhaps the most interesting and potentially counter-hegemonic aspect of Edmonds claims that was put forward during this period was that the FBI "had allowed diplomatic sensitivities with other nations to impede the translations of important terrorism intelligence."¹¹⁴ What exactly were these "diplomatic sensitivities"? The question was left untouched. This aspect of her allegations was treated uncritically, portrayed as a legitimate consideration. Allowing "diplomatic sensitivities" to impede counterintelligence gathering in the FBI would be an extremely newsworthy story according to professional criteria of newsworthiness. Diplomatic sensitivities are not

¹¹³ Mauro, F., Nahon, B., Roblin, F., & Rozenberg, P. (Producers) & Verboud, M. & Villet, R. (Directors). (2006). *Kill the Messenger* [Motion Picture]. France: Zadig Productions.

¹¹⁴ Lichtblau, E. (2004, July 29). Whistleblowing said to be a factor in an FBI firing. *The New York Times*. Section A, p. 1.

something that is expected to be a consideration in the impartial process of counterintelligence investigation, but news organizations steered clear of exploring this unnerving aspect of the story. Government officials were bold enough to say that “diplomatic sensitivities” were the reason for blocking her case, and shockingly this was not a misstep because news organizations did nothing with it. Again, the hegemonic model of news production seemed to be the best explanation for how this issue was treated.

During this period an article was published in *Vanity Fair*, on Aug 15 2005, that touched upon Edmonds’ counter-hegemonic claims. This piece was not in the data set of “major news” from the Lexis Nexis database, but is worth mentioning because despite being quite newsworthy no major media outlet picked up the story. In reference to this article, Edmonds stated:

Yeah, it was decent. It was a start and another mind-boggling thing is the silence of the rest of the media once it came out. I mean, think about it. Its exposing, it is exposing - even though they are like, "no comment, it can't be confirmed by the Justice Department" - they're talking about the Speaker of the House, and they're talking about the Speaker of the House being involved in suitcases of illegal money coming from, like, you know, narcotics activities, being raised by narcotics activities. No responses by the mainstream media. It was like everybody went zip...¹¹⁵

The involvement of the Speaker of the House, Dennis Hastert, in the acceptance of bribes coming from narcotics activities would be newsworthy according to just about any common sense idea about what makes news. Professional standards and ethics would almost *require* that this news story be examined. Even if Edmonds was lying, the story was worth looking into for the sake of public knowledge about the validity of these

¹¹⁵ Edmonds, Sibel (telephone interview, October 24, 2007)

claims. This story was certainly sensational and had the potential to sell news. In addition, for any news organizations that operated according to principles of liberal partisanship, the story provided an excellent opportunity to delegitimize one of the most powerful Republican lawmakers. Despite all of the reasons why this story could be considered extremely newsworthy according to various models of news production, it was not touched by any mainstream news organization. Even the hegemonic model of news production would allow for the inclusion of this story in the news because it may have given establishment Democrats an opportunity to gain power through an attack on Republican Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert. However, Edmonds asserts that Democrats were involved in such activities as well, which would explain why no elites pushed this story for news organization to index. Again, the hegemonic model of news production best explains what happened.

The partisan exploitation of Edmonds' story

After relatively sustained coverage over a period of years, it is interesting to see how far Edmonds' claims were distorted to fit certain political agendas. For example, editorial page editor Tony Blankley of the Washington Times wrote an opinion piece arguing that "Ethnic and religious profiling is a specific power that must be available to our government," harkening back to WWII when "the internment of German, Italian and Japanese aliens (and American citizens of Japanese ancestry) was found to be constitutional by the Supreme Court on the explicit basis that it was reasonable to suspect

them of loyalty to a hostile country.”¹¹⁶ He goes on to say that “Our policy must follow the dictates of common sense and national security.” How he connects Edmonds case to this is interesting, arguing that the “political correctness” from a liberal culture has constrained police and intelligence agencies to the point where they cannot effectively fight terrorism.

For example, since September 11, our government has had a critical shortage of Arabic translators. But according to the testimony of Sibel Dinez Edmonds, a former Arabic translator for the FBI, *ambiguous loyalties in the FBI translation office* compromise our national security. The FBI should not be intimidated into politically correct behavior that endangers security. But this is the natural outcome of policy that puts political correctness before common sense.

Such an interpretation of Edmonds’ allegations are almost laughable. When Edmonds was pointing toward high-level officials such as Dennis Hastert - crusader against “political correctness” and champion of such “common sense” national security measures like the Patriot Act - as being the ones whose patriotic loyalty was in question, to claim that liberal commitments to “political correctness” lead to the hiring of low-level translators who had “ambiguous loyalties” was outrageous. Edmonds never made any such claims. The above commentary is an extreme example, but advocates of increasing law enforcement and intelligence powers at the cost of civil liberties were often able to use Edmonds’ to back up their claims that “political correctness” was an obstacle to national security. It appeared that no matter what Edmonds really said, these exploitations of her claims were able to make their way into the news as long as they were advanced by “credible” officials or established sources.

¹¹⁶ Blankley, T. (2005, September 14). At war with an enemy of an unspoken name. *The Washington Times*.

State secrecy justified in the name of “foreign business relations”

A demand for secrecy made in the name of national security by the Attorney General was enough to shut down legal inquiry. This raises the question, what is “national security”? Who defines it? As Sibel Edmonds had pointed out, Ashcroft stated that invocation of the state secrets privilege was to protect “certain sensitive diplomatic relations and business relations of the US.” This conception of national security, broadcast by Ashcroft without invoking more than a hint of scandal, probably says a lot about our political system. It also says a lot about our news system. The idea that “business relations” could guide the government’s invocation of the state secrets privilege is something that, according to dominant norms, is actually quite shocking. Diplomatic relations is commonly accepted as a reason to override legal proceedings and the release of information to the public, but “business relations” is altogether something different. This statement made by Ashcroft was certainly newsworthy according to professional standards of journalism, begging further exploration. However, Ashcroft’s statements about “business relations” were relayed to the public as if they were no more in need of exploration than reasons based upon “national security” and “diplomatic relations.”

Sibel Edmonds formulated a more eloquent analysis of the official reason for invoking the state secrets privilege than I can offer here:

It is way past time for a little bit of critical thinking. The Attorney General cites two reasons to justify the unconstitutional and panic driven assault on me and my case. Reason one: To protect certain diplomatic relations - not named since obviously our officials are ashamed of admitting to these relations. Reason two: To protect certain U.S. foreign business relations. Let’s take each one and dissect it (I have given up on our mass media to do that for us!). For reason one, since when is the Department of Justice, the FBI, in the business of protecting ‘US

sensitive diplomatic relations?’ They appear to be acting as a mouthpiece for the Department of State. Now, that’s one entity that has strong reasons to cover up, for its own self, what will end up being a blunder of mammoth scale. Not internationally; not really; it is the American people and their outrage they must be worried about; they wouldn’t want to have a few of their widely recognized officials being held criminally liable; would they?

As for reason two, I can assure you that the U.S. foreign business relations they may be referring to are not among those that benefit the majority of the American people; a handful of MIC [military-industrial-complex] entities and their lobbying arms can by no means be considered that, can they? In fact, the American people, their national safety and security, and their best interests are being sacrificed for a handful of those with their foreign business interest. Also, since when are nuclear black market related underground activities considered official U.S. foreign business; one may wonder?¹¹⁷

These public statements by Edmonds made it clear that inefficiencies in the FBI, the incompetence of individuals working in her department, and even the corruption of her supervisors were not the core of her allegations and neither were the most newsworthy aspects of her claims. However, these statements questioned the legitimacy of the national security establishment, which is something we would expect to be ignored or distorted if a hegemonic model of news production shapes news coverage over national security whistleblowers. Indeed, they were distorted and ignored.

Phase Three: January 2008: Systemic Iniquity in the News at Last

Nothing was mentioned of Sibel Edmonds throughout 2007. The story seemed to have died, but made one final gasp for air in January of 2008 in a three-part feature written for the center-right Rupert Murdoch-owned London Times and reprinted in the Australian by journalists Chris Gourlay, Jonathan Calvert, and Joe Lauria. The first of the series published on January 6, 2008 was entitled “For Sale: West’s Deadly Nuclear

¹¹⁷ Edmonds, Sibel. “Gagged But Not Dead.” *BuzzFlash*. Retrieved April 13, 2007, from <www.buzzflash.com/contributors/05/05/con05170.html>

Secrets.” This was the first actual news article (not an opinion piece) to represent Edmonds allegations in terms of systemic iniquities. Here, for the first time the US State Department and Pentagon are targeted for scrutiny. Rather than pointing toward a few corrupt bad apples, it portrays corruption in these organizations as systemic.

Edmonds is quoted saying, “What I found was damning.” The article states, “foreign intelligence agents had enlisted the support of US officials to acquire a network of moles in sensitive military and nuclear institutions.”¹¹⁸ Edmonds is quoted saying, “While the FBI was investigating, several arms of the government were shielding what was going on.” Her experiences are said to have illustrated “how western government officials turned a blind eye, or were even helping, countries such as Pakistan acquire bomb technology.” The article reports that this network had been monitored for years, “But rather than shut it down, investigations by law enforcement bodies such as the FBI and Britain’s Revenue and Customs have been aborted to preserve diplomatic relations.”

The article also describes how foreign operatives in the United States who were suspected as knowing about or aiding the 9/11 attacks were taken in for questioning, but that members of this network helped release these suspects and send them out of the United States. Edmonds is quoted saying, “A primary target would call the official and point to names on the list and say, ‘We need to get them out of the US because we can’t afford for them to spill the beans...The official said that he would ‘take care of it.’”

In the article, Edmonds also claims that a number of senior officials in the Pentagon had helped Israeli and Turkish agents. “The people provided lists of potential moles from Pentagon-related institutions who had access to databases concerning this

¹¹⁸ Calvert, J., Gourlay, C. & Lauria, J. (2008, January 6). For sale: West’s deadly nuclear secrets. *The Sunday Times*. p. 5.

information," she said. "The handlers, who were part of the diplomatic community, would then try to recruit those people to become moles for the network. The lists contained all their 'hooking points', which could be financial or sexual pressure points, their exact job in the Pentagon and what stuff they had access to."

The second part of the series, published on January 20, was entitled "FBI 'Covers Up' Files Exposing Theft of Nuclear Secrets."¹¹⁹ Edmonds is reported to have alleged that the FBI was investigating a Turkish and Israeli-run network that paid high-ranking American officials to steal nuclear weapons secrets. These secrets were then sold on the international black market to countries such as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. A "crucial file" that proves this, Edmonds alleges, was being covered up by the FBI at the behest of other government agencies. "I can tell you that that file and the operations it refers to did exist from 1996 to February 2002. The file refers to the counterintelligence programme that the Department of Justice has declared to be a state secret to protect sensitive diplomatic relations," she is quoted saying. "Edmonds had told this newspaper that members of the Turkish political and diplomatic community in the US had been actively acquiring nuclear secrets. They often acted as a conduit, she said, for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's spy agency, because they attracted less suspicion." Regarding the gag order against her, she states that it was "invoked not to protect sensitive diplomatic relations but criminal activities involving US officials who were endangering US national security."

¹¹⁹ Calvert, J., Gourlay, C. & Lauria, J. (2008, January 20). FBI 'covers up' files exposing theft of nuclear secrets. *The Sunday Times* (London). p. 13.

The final segment of this three part series was published at the end of January. It was entitled “Mole’s Tip-Off Thwarted Nuclear Spy Ring Probe.”¹²⁰ In it, the authors stated “an investigation into the illicit sale of American nuclear secrets was compromised by a senior official in the State Department, a former FBI employee has claimed.” It goes on to report, “The official is said to have tipped off a foreign contact about a bogus CIA company used to investigate the sale of nuclear secrets.” This CIA front company was identified as Brewster Jennings & Associates, the firm used to investigate the network by Valerie Plame, who was outed as a CIA agent in 2003 by White House officials. This senior State Department official, Edmonds claims, had assisted in the creation of this nuclear blackmarket ring and in one wiretapped conversation she had heard him arranging to pick up a \$15,000 bribe. The article reports:

One group of Turkish agents who had come to America on the pretext of researching alternative energy sources was introduced to Brewster Jennings through the Washington-based American Turkish Council (ATC), a lobby group that aids commercial ties between the countries. Edmonds says the Turks believed Brewster Jennings to be energy consultants and were planning to hire them...He (the State Department official) found out about the arrangement ... and he contacted one of the foreign targets and said ... you need to stay away from Brewster Jennings because they are a cover for the government...The target ... immediately followed up by calling several people to warn them about Brewster Jennings...This person also called an ISI person to warn them.

This series of news articles went far beyond portraying Edmonds’ allegations in terms of the earlier systemic inefficacy frame that dominated news. It represented Edmonds allegations in terms of systemic iniquity, namely the cover up of official complicity in the transfer of nuclear secrets that ended up in the hands of the Pakistani AQ Khan network that allegedly sold these secrets to North Korea and Iran. It was

¹²⁰ Calvert, J., Gourlay, C. & Lauria, J. (2008, January 27). Mole’s tip-off thwarted nuclear spy ring probe. *The Sunday Times*. p. 7.

published in a non-US based news outlet, which is something we would expect if the hegemonic model of news production applies to coverage of national security whistleblowers. British papers would be expected to receive less state flak from stories that target the systemic iniquities of institutions in other nations. Also, the authors of the story were not beat reporters who routinely relied on their relationships with the same inside sources. They were investigative reporters who would likely move on to a different story with different sources. It is also interesting that these articles appeared in papers owned by Rupert Murdoch, which according to the partisan model of news production one would expect to advance frames that fit in with a conservative establishment viewpoint. Apparently, the partisan model of news production did not apply in this instance.

As newsworthy as this story was, one might expect these articles to trigger an explosion of coverage on Edmonds again – perhaps a new spate of coverage finally getting it right by highlighting the core counter-hegemonic components of Edmonds’ claims that pointed toward systemic iniquity. However, no major US or even foreign English language news outlet produced another story mentioning Edmonds name. It appears that the hegemonic model of news production largely applies in coverage of US whistleblowers by non-US based news organizations, but this model does not apply in these situations as rigidly as it does when US news organizations represent the allegations of national security whistleblowers from the US.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Secrecy is the crucial component necessary to make state organized crime possible. In its ideal form, the news media are there to make sure that such state secrecy does not exist. It is reasonable to expect that the existence of large-scale criminal activities can only last a short time within institutions that proclaim the public good as their aim. It is unrealistic to believe that the multitude of lower echelon workers in government agencies required to carry out large-scale criminal operations are bounded so tightly by network allegiances that they would knowingly betray the public interest. It is almost inevitable that at least one of these people will talk if they see something illegal or unethical going on as a matter of routine. Therefore, large-scale criminal operations within the government would be impossible because of the unavailability of whistleblowers. However, this argument assumes that the system of mainstream news operates in the interest of the public and faithfully pursues important whistleblower claims. The revelations of whistleblowers are only as good as the news stories that cover their claims.

The public depends on the media to convey the allegations of whistleblowers who discover practices in powerful institutions that contradict the public interest. Considering the importance of news coverage for whistleblowers and the centrality of this coverage for true democratic governance, this study explores whether mainstream news fulfills its supposed function as an effective last resort for whistleblowers. When covering whistleblowers who point toward systemic iniquities, do media bark and growl as watchdogs guarding the public interest, or do they simply perform tricks that distract public attention away from the real sources of crime and corruption in government and

corporate organizations? How are whistleblower claims represented in the media, and what explains such coverage?

Clearly, whistleblowers can get attention from the news media, but the extent to which they are able to get their allegations faithfully represented is not so evident. Research on whistleblowers leaves questions about how their allegations are handled in the media largely unexplored. Sociologist Suzan Marx contends that whistleblowers must be wary of bringing their cases to journalists, stating that the whistleblower “must realize that when he/she selects the media as his/her whistleblowing channel of choice, the media could very well run away with the allegations” (13) and that there “is always a real threat that the whistleblower could become a puppet of the publicity forces at work during the process” (3). Although news media may give “positive” coverage to a whistleblower, Marx states that “we know from experience that positive media coverage does not necessarily guarantee a positive outcome for the whistleblower” (3). Marx argued that news media do not always serve as an effective outlet for whistleblowers’ allegations.

This study gives empirical credence to the argument put forward by Suzan Marx. Although FBI whistleblower Sibel Edmonds alleged criminal systemic iniquities in the State Department and Pentagon, major media represented her claims mostly in terms of systemic inefficacy in the FBI such as “ineptitude,” “bad management,” and the production of “shoddy work.” In an interview with Edmonds, she makes it clear that “the cover up was not happening because the FBI wanted them covered up. In fact, they

wanted to pursue that as far as the agents are concerned, but the pressure was coming directly from the Pentagon and the State Department.”¹²¹

When iniquities were highlighted in US news, they were portrayed only as emanating from individuals positioned low in the organizational hierarchy, never systemically or from high up in the chain of command. A handful of news items did in fact represent her allegations in terms of systemic iniquity, but these were limited to foreign English language coverage. Never did even one US news item represent her allegations in terms of systemic iniquity. This finding supports the contention that the hegemonic model of news production best applies to US news coverage of national security whistleblowers. It also suggests that the hegemonic model even applies to major English language news media based outside the US, but less so. This case study demonstrates that when whistleblowers approach the news media with allegations that can be categorized as systemic iniquity, their allegations will likely be ignored or distorted.

As “inside sources,” whistleblowers may appear to bypass the constraints faced by political outsiders who attempt to broadcast unpopular or politically inconvenient messages in the news media, but coverage over Edmonds’ allegations shows that whistleblowers do not necessarily escape these constraints. The study also suggests that the news system mostly operates in accordance with the hegemony model, even when a whistleblower is involved. A news system based upon professional standards and ethics would put forward allegations based on criteria of newsworthiness and credibility, even the most politically inconvenient allegations. A hegemonic news system, however,

¹²¹ Edmonds, Sibel (telephone interview, October 24, 2007)

would tend to promote viewpoints and information that contribute to the legitimization of government institutions and powerful officials while suppressing viewpoints and information that challenge elite interests. A hegemonic news system may present what can be argued as “diverse” views, but only to an extent limited by dominant hegemonic principles including “the legitimacy of the national security State” and “the right and ability of authorized agencies to manage conflict and make the necessary reforms” (Gitlin, 270). Unfortunately, coverage over Sibel Edmonds’ allegations best fit the hegemonic model of news media.

Asked whether any major news media covered her story in a way that was “at least half-way good,” Edmonds responded, “In the mainstream media? No.”¹²² She further explains:

They do this not only with my case and other whistleblower cases because then it comes, "oh poor him, lost his job, lost her job, almost getting divorced in some whistleblowers cases," and "let's talk about the emotional aspect of this poor thing" or among themselves when they talk, "oh, why, this is a disgruntled employee" and either the pejorative aspect of this or that "we want to make a sentimental story out of this."¹²³

Alternative explanations

One might argue that Edmonds’ case is extraordinary because she was under a Justice Department gag order that barred her from speaking directly about her allegations. One may assume that the reporters simply relayed what Edmonds had told them, and since Edmonds was not allowed to talk about certain details of her allegations then the media was not able to do more with it. Therefore, it may appear that the hegemony

¹²² Edmonds, Sibel (telephone interview, October 24, 2007)

¹²³ Edmonds, Sibel (telephone interview, October 24, 2007)

model was in play when in actuality, external constraints prevented journalists from knowing about these elements of her allegations. If Edmonds would have told journalists these elements of her allegations, they would have certainly picked them up. However, Edmonds makes it clear that she did indeed emphasize the counter-hegemonic components of her story that she considered her core allegations when she spoke with reporters.

One may also argue that professional standards and ethics were actually the determinants that lead reporters to steer clear of the systemic iniquity allegations and the allegations of corruption among high-level officials and politicians because they were not able to corroborate her story or gather further evidence of her claims. Professional standards would require that journalists had more than just the word of an ex-translator who had been fired from her job before they began relaying such impactful claims. This argument does not hold because Edmonds had indeed backed up these allegations with further evidence and witnesses. Edmonds states: “They were reporters from McClatchy group, they were reporters from USA Today, they were people from New York Times, not only that I provided information or enough information for them to get going, but also I put them in touch with other FBI agents and some of them high level agents...”¹²⁴ The argument that Edmonds credibility could not be established does not hold because she offered documentation and additional witnesses to corroborate her story. Although these witnesses were working FBI agents who refused to go on the record, that still does not explain why news organizations refused to run with these aspects of her allegations because they routinely use unnamed sources in their coverage of official frames. Such an

¹²⁴ Edmonds, Sibel (telephone interview, October 24, 2007)

argument is based on a double standard that favors high-level insiders, ultimately supporting the hegemony model and the theory of indexing.

Asked if it would have made a difference if she had not been under a gag order and had been able to speak freely, Edmonds answered:

No. That didn't have much impact because I have found ways to wiggle around a lot of issues that would be, I would consider, let's say justifiably classified, meaning I would never ever have to deal with, or talk about any particular informants or talk about the methods of intelligence gathering. I can let's say, even show documents or talk about information [...] I have, whenever I trusted a journalist, okay, and have said, "okay, this guy or this woman really wants to follow this case." Not only that I have given that person this stuff, and explained this stuff, I would go and I would pull out other people from the FBI [...], so begging someone, one agent saying can you please, let's have coffee. So I would meet this particular journalists and this agent, let's say at Barnes and Nobles in the coffee shop there. We sit there and I would have that agent go through and explain some of this stuff and even maybe show documents, not necessarily classified, but documents backing it up. So, with other witnesses talking, with me giving them all the information except some very little details [...]. This guy put me in touch with the McClatchy bureau chief in DC, so I met with this guy and I provided him with lots of details and I organized meetings where I brought several agents and I had them sit in front of me as these agents talked, and this is early October, and he just disappeared. It got to a point where this was the last time one of these agents talked, it was like "Sibel, don't you see?" It's almost like a deep state in operation here. It's not only Congress and things. You know, I'm not going to talk to the mainstream media again. I'm risking my life and I'm risking everything here, and I'm taking the time all the way coming from Maryland meeting with this guy bringing him documents. "Don't you see, you're gullable, you're naive, you're like this Don Quixote trying to fight the windmills." These people, they're all corrupt, including the journalists, and this was McClatchy. And this was a month and a half, and they just went numb. Despite the documents, despite the FBI agents who gave them details about Hastert and others in Congress. And it was the American public's right to know and they didn't want it.¹²⁵

Edmonds had emphasized the counter-hegemonic aspects of her allegations to journalists, and supported these allegations with documents and witnesses. The argument that Edmonds should have simply come forward and “spilled the beans” in the mainstream

¹²⁵ Edmonds, Sibel (telephone interview, October 24, 2007)

media does not hold. She did. In 2007, one week after my interview with her, she challenged the mainstream media to cover her story if she broke her gag order and faced prosecution. "I am willing to come on and talk about everything." Her conditions were that she would have a minimum of fifteen to twenty minutes airtime, "not just five second soundbites." Also, it had to be live or "if it's going to be prerecorded like CBS 60 Minutes, I want witnesses."¹²⁶

I'm going to say, NBC, CBS, ABC, CNN, I don't care. I'm daring them. I'm willing to go on air and talk about everything. Give me the time, and one condition: it's not going to be edited, or it's going to be basically, you make it live, or if it's going to be prerecorded I want witnesses, because I'm not going to take my chances with them again.¹²⁷

This challenge made its way around the blogosphere one week later including DailyKos, Democratic Underground, and Brad Blog:

"Here's my promise to the American Public: If anyone of the major networks --- ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, MSNBC, FOX --- promise to air the entire segment, without editing, I promise to tell them everything that I know."¹²⁸

After this challenge, no major television news outlet took the opportunity. One could imagine the excitement that could be built up around a television news show that took Edmonds' offer. Ratings and advertising dollars for such a program would likely bring high profits to any television news show. However, not one major television news program took advantage of Edmonds' offer. It appeared that Chomsky and Herman's five filters, which include the profit imperative, overall had more of an impact than the

¹²⁶ Edmonds, Sibel (telephone interview, October 24, 2007)

¹²⁷ Edmonds, Sibel (telephone interview, October 24, 2007)

¹²⁸ Friedman, B. (2007, October 29). Exclusive: FBI whistleblower Sibel Edmonds will now tell all – and face charges if necessary – to any major television network that will let her. Retrieved November 2007, from from BRAD BLOG: <http://www.bradblog.com/?p=5197>

profit imperative alone. No major television news outlet took the opportunity presented by Edmonds and neither did any major US news organization run another story on Edmonds, ever. One could not design a better critical test to demonstrate the power of the hegemonic model.

In support of the market model one may also argue that a story on the systemic iniquity allegations set forward by Edmonds were simply too expensive to produce in a competitive news market driven by the bottom line. While such a story may be sensational and have the potential to sell news, it was simply too much of a financial risk because the amount of investigative reporting it would take to construct a solid story would be too much. Investigative pieces do cost a lot but the problem with this argument is that stories that news organizations did run that centered on other elements of Edmonds' allegations probably cost as much as a story that involved relaying Edmonds' claims about systemic iniquities. Besides, no financial obstacles prevented news organizations from directly referring to Edmonds' own words, which is something news organizations do all the time. When administration officials make outrageous claims that would cost millions of dollars to verify, news organizations often simply transmit those claims. Why would they not do the same for others, unless there is a systematic bias toward uncritically transmitting the claims of officials, insiders, and established groups? Another reason why this argument does not hold is that, for a news piece that does dig deep to investigate Edmonds' claims of systemic iniquities, those costs are carried only by the first media outlet to publish such a story. News outlets routinely lift other news outlets stories, sometimes almost verbatim, and publish them as their own. In this case, after the London Times published a story that finally set forth the counter-hegemonic

components of Edmonds allegations pointing at systemic iniquities, the story was not picked up by any other major news organization. It is difficult to find valid reasons why Edmonds was continuously referred to as the FBI whistleblower who “accused the FBI of ineptitude” or “her co-workers of shoddy translations” other than what is offered by the hegemonic model of news production and the theory of indexing.

Excuses from news organizations

When Edmonds met with journalists, reporters themselves often seemed interested in her story, but ultimately the publication of her story was beyond their control. A number of excuses were given as to why these news organizations would not run with the counter-hegemonic aspects of Edmonds’ allegations.

The reporter would get so excited, would start sweating, saying, "Oh my God, I can't believe this." And seeing the documents, interviewing the people, then they would say, okay, so, we're going to run this story hopefully in the next week or two weeks, and then nothing will happen. Then we'll start calling and they would say, "Well, the editor thinks, or says that these agents, if they're not willing to go on the record by name and be out, we're not going to print it.

...I have been given this a lot, saying, "well, we have to check with the other side," meaning the Justice Department people, and the State Department people, "and we called them" - and this is including Dennis Hastert's office - "they say, 'no comment', and because they're not giving us any comment, we can't print it." And I'm like, "Are they denying it?" They're like, "No." "Then why don't you say, here are all the evidence?" and "No, because, they are not providing with any comment." So every time the government...do you expect that they're going to say, yes, this is right. No. Okay, now what do you expect? "Well, you know, if they would at least give us something, even some kind of a denial would be something so that we can say we contact them, but we don't want to print and then in the middle of the story say, well, we contacted this State Department official and then this FBI official and they said 'No comment.'"¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Edmonds, Sibel (telephone interview, October 24, 2007)

According to professional standards of journalism, “both” sides of a story should be presented. However, the fact that officials give “no comment” to a set of claims do not always automatically exclude stories from being produced. It is not uncommon to see in a news story a statement to something of the effect “government agency X was contacted and refused to comment on the story” or “official X did not return our calls.” Why, in the case of Edmonds, the fact that officials refused to comment about her allegations precluded any story from being produced cannot be explained by this contention. Even if it was true that news organizations never run stories when they cannot get a comment from a government agency in question, it would be a travesty because that would mean that whenever a government agency or official perceives a news story as threatening their interests all they would have to do to prevent inquiry into the matter would be to refuse to give any comment. The fact that officials and government agencies at the heart of Edmonds’ accusations did not give comment on the matter does not explain the lack of media inquiry, but is rather an excuse, and a bad one at that.

Another “reason” or excuse why Edmonds’ core allegations were not picked up was news media organizations’ obsession with getting the first scoop on a story, regardless of the angle. Asked whether any stories in alternative media or the blogosphere was picked up by mainstream media, Edmonds asserted,

In fact, what happened is this. [...] I have had mainstream media reporters, this is even a year, a year and a half ago, saying "oh, but that, I believe I saw something to that effect," even if they didn't have all the detail in some blog or some alternative media, "I'm not going to cover anything that someone else has covered it, therefore, we can't cover it." That's another excuse you're given. [...] It's old news.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Edmonds, Sibel (telephone interview, October 24, 2007)

This excuse does not hold, because, again, news organizations produced many, many stories about Edmonds. If this explanation were valid, we would see only a handful of news stories mentioning Edmonds each time there were another twist or turn. Moreover, stories often virtually plagiarized other stories about Edmonds in the news. The drive for the “scoop” is often very powerful in news organizations but does not preclude stories from being produced that effectively reproduce other news organizations’ stories. If the drive for new scoops and angles really were so powerful, we would see much variation in news stories about Edmonds, rather than the “all together now” sort of journalism that is apparent in coverage over Edmonds. Furthermore, if the drive for fresh angles were so powerful, there was a treasure trove of new of completely new angle and lines of inquiry that could be found in Edmonds’ extremely sensational and newsworthy allegations of systemic iniquity. However, news organizations systematically steered clear of anything having to do with high-level corruption or system-wide criminal operations.

Reliance on official sources

The process by which Edmonds’ allegations were defined in the news media is one that can be described as *selective vindication*. News media were ostensibly supportive of Edmonds’ but through their continual reliance on official sources they allowed others to define what her allegations were. This appeared to play a key role in how hegemony operated through the news system. A number of Justice Department reports, official statements, and leaks affirmed certain parts of Edmonds’ allegations and these concessions were then presented in the media as validation of her claims. The result was that the Justice Department was able to effectively define her allegations in a

backhanded way. For example, a letter written by FBI Director Robert Mueller that was leaked to the New York Times concluded that Edmonds' was indeed fired from her job "in part because she accused the bureau of ineptitude" and that the Bureau did not "aggressively investigate her claims of espionage against a co-worker."¹³¹ Whether the management of her claims was a conscious strategy of damage control on the part of government officials matters less than the outcome, which was that Edmonds' was not allowed to define her own allegations.

The way Edmonds' story was covered was also affected by the reliance on official sources in more direct ways. In my interview with Edmonds in 2007, she stated that around the time the "60 Minutes" piece ran her attorneys and their public relations people contacted Washington Post reporter Dan Eggen who covered the Justice Department beat. They tried to convince Eggen to run a story on Edmonds explaining, "there's so much more to it, just start digging."

Edmonds said that a few days later, Eggen sent an email to the law office representing the person who does the press releases saying, "I have someone, some high-level sources I have developed within the Justice Department...they don't want me to touch this story and I'm not going to fuck up my sources for some goddamn translator." It appears that reliance on official sources is a very crucial factor in how stories about whistleblowers are framed. Whistleblowers can be seen as a kind of insider, which is why they get any news coverage in the first place, but how their stories are covered appears to be largely determined by how higher-ups respond to these claims (or don't

¹³¹ 2004 July 29 – Whistle-blowing said to be a factor in an FBI firing – The New York Times – Eric Lichtblau

respond, rather). The theory of indexing applies in many ways to coverage over Edmonds, as evidenced in the way her claims were shaped in ways that helped certain powerful officials and politicians make their own claims. What Edmonds said herself, to reporters, on her website, and in the alternative press, seemed to matter very little.

In sum, news organizations in the US completely avoided representing Edmonds' allegations in terms of systemic iniquity. Individual iniquity, individual inefficacy, and systemic inefficacy were all frames that were at times advanced by powerful insiders and established groups, and in line with the theory of indexing these frames were put forward in news items that represented Edmonds' allegations. Even though Edmonds' emphasized and supported her allegations regarding high-level officials in the State Department and Pentagon operating in a criminal network involving the sale of state secrets, news organizations continuously referred to her as a whistleblower that complained of organizational dysfunction in the FBI, espionage by one low-level co-worker, and shoddy work by translators. Coverage over Edmonds was almost consistently positive, but it failed to represent Edmonds' claims in terms of her core allegations.

CONCLUSION

This study helps answer questions about how national security whistleblowers with allegations are likely to be treated in the news media. Susan Marx warned that news media may run away with the allegations of whistleblowers, but did not go further to explain when, how, or why. A variety of popular and scholarly theories abound that

would predict Edmonds' allegations of widespread corruption at the systemic level would take prominence in coverage, such as the belief that professional standards of newsworthiness determine coverage or the idea that sensationalism drives news production. On the other hand more critical approaches to news production, such as the hegemony model and the theory of indexing, would predict that elements of Edmonds' story that threatened elite power would be distorted or ignored in the news.

An analysis of news representations of Edmonds' allegations finds that her allegations of systemic iniquities were almost completely ignored. Of the stories that did represent her allegations in terms of systemic problems, they were nearly consistent in framing problems as indicative of a failure of the system to meet its stated or assumed aims. The legitimacy of the national security establishment was almost never questioned. Despite the fact that Edmonds emphasized her allegations of systemic iniquity, this component of her allegations were dismissed in favor of characterizing her as a whistleblower who complained of organizational dysfunction within the FBI, espionage among one low-level co-worker, or "shoddy work" produced in the translation department. Government agencies and high-level officials were not portrayed as working against the public interest, as Edmonds had alleged.

Analysis of coverage over FBI whistleblower Sibel Edmonds suggests that allegations having to do with systemic iniquities will most likely be avoided. When institutions are portrayed as targets of attribution, injustice frames are avoided and inefficiencies or dysfunctions in the system were highlighted. When injustice frames were involved, targets of attribution were portrayed only as individuals and not government institutions, and almost always low-level individuals rather than high-level

officials. In this way, the media may confront the crimes or wrongdoing of low-level individuals, but fail to ever challenge political institutions. The resulting discourse avoids structural level criticisms and minimizes the prospect of collective action for extensive social change.

Contrary to conventional wisdom about politically neutral factors such as professional standards and market imperatives being the main determinants of how news is produced, coverage over Edmonds is best explained by the hegemonic model of news coverage and the theory of indexing. News organizations relayed elements of Edmonds' allegations only if elite actors, such as Justice Department officials or prominent politicians, advanced those elements. The result is that, when whistleblowers raise questions about the operations of government institutions, elite actors within those institutions are able to effectively manage media inquiry. Imagine if news organizations showed the same deference to all groups accused of wrongdoing. A group of low-level pot farmers would be able to shape news coverage in their favor by telling journalists that they indeed failed to use organic fertilizer on their crops, containing news coverage within those boundaries. Such an analogy might seem ridiculous but to a whistleblower whose allegations of systemic corruption were abandoned in favor of focusing on bureaucratic bungling, that analogy would likely seem accurate.

Optimistic theories of press-state relations promoted by some parts of the journalistic establishment as taking on an aggressive watchdog role along with more critical conceptions are considered in relation to the case of press coverage over Edmonds' claims. If the study reveals that claims challenging the whole of elite interests were systematically ignored, twisted, or downplayed, supporting the critical body of

theory that regards the mainstream news organizations as protectors of elite interests. These findings diminish widespread convictions that such flagship news organizations as the New York Times are aggressive watchdogs acting on behalf of the public interest.

If coverage over Edmonds is typical of media treatment of whistleblowers, there are major problems not only with news media, but with the health of democracy that news media is supposed to support. Top-level officials in government agencies are apparently able to carry out criminal operations without fear of news media exposing these systemic iniquities. Edmonds asks, “What do they have to be worried about? They can see so easily that some shenanigans, gag orders and state secrets privilege, they made me kind of go away. [...] They know I have not given up, but they are so confident because they know that nobody's going to cover it in the media.”¹³² She states that many whistleblowers consider investigative journalism “dead in our country.”

Without the media putting on the pressure, that's the only way the American public can know about what's going on with their government, the guy who is sitting in Iowa, a guy who is sitting in, wherever. [...] The foremost and most important accountability is the public, [but it] is not there so why do they have to worry about it? They're not accountable to the American public. [...] Your mainstream media, your media, doesn't want to put it out there, and I offered it.¹³³

This study suggests that critical media theory should be an important component in the concept of state organized crime. The concept of state organized crime is one that occupies many criminologists who focus mainly on elite state actors and the structural conditions that bring about state organized crime. While it is recognized that in a modern democratic state such as the US, elite actors must maintain legitimacy in the eyes of the public. This imperative makes secrecy a necessary component to the operation of state-

¹³² Edmonds, Sibel (telephone interview, October 24, 2007)

¹³³ Edmonds, Sibel (telephone interview, October 24, 2007)

organized crime. When the state itself is involved with nefarious activities in either an active or facilitative manner (be it support of political terror campaigns, human rights violations, weapons proliferation, etc.), the government must do so without widespread public knowledge in order to maintain legitimacy. Secrecy is the crucial component necessary to make state organized crime possible. In its ideal form, the news media is there to make sure that that secrecy does not exist. The news media establishment is therefore a crucial institution to assess when considering questions about the operation of state organized crime and general health of democracy. In the case of Sibel Edmonds, by selecting only the most innocuous components of her allegations and ignoring the parts that pointed toward widespread criminal activities in the State Department and Pentagon, the news media effectively facilitated state organized crime.

Even many media professionals would agree that the news system is organized in a way that makes elite propaganda an expected outcome. Some of those same media professionals argue that this is why it is so important to train journalists and educate audiences for the critical faculties to make judgments about what they read and instill within journalists a sense of vigilance. Critical thought among journalists and the audience is essential, but this research demonstrates that despite the noteworthy measure of watchfulness that does exist among many journalists and their audiences, news reporting is skewed toward representing a hegemonic viewpoint, which has undeniable implications for democracy. This recognition moves us away from the demobilizing emphasis on individual education and tighter adherence to illusive objectivity and more toward a mobilizing emphasis on the collective action necessary to change the news system itself at the structural level.

Future studies on national security whistleblowers who point toward systemic iniquities can determine whether the case of Sibel Edmonds was indeed typical. Does all coverage of whistleblowers fit in with the hegemonic model of news coverage? If so, this would further support the argument that the new system itself must undergo some dramatic changes.

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