Secrecy as a Means of Control: Coercion versus Groupthink

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In a society where knowledge is power, the ability to control the distribution of knowledge, what people know and when they know it, becomes the ultimate power. Secrecy is thus a means to an end: the end is controlling other people by controlling what information they have (or do not have). In STS.011, we have read cases illustrating two different ways in which secrecy facilitated control. In some cases, secrecy became the ultimate bargaining chip, giving a privalaged few the right of the censor: the power to decide who is permitted to speak and what they are allowed to say. In other cases, secrecy facilitated control by creating insular, psychologically isolated environments in which individuals were cut off from both the consequences of their actions and the value system of the larger community. These environments became incubators for a new group identity in which morality was redefined to serve the purposes of the group. Secrecy plays a vital role in the creation and maintenance of these isolated group identities. In other words, secrecy can be used to control either by making speakers beholden to censors or facilitating the creation of a group identity. We will explore both possibilities in order to understand how secrecy brings about control and why it sometimes fails.

We begin by considering how secrecy facilitates control by creating psychologically isolated environments. Separated and vulnerable, individuals trapped in such environments become ethically

adrift, their consciences ignored (or retrained) amidst powerful group dynamics where both personal ethics and objective reality become redefined to serve the purposes of the group. In this Orwellian world, ignorance becomes strength and true becomes false, so saying one thing in public while believing the opposite becomes perfectly natural; in the service of the group identity to which individual conscience has been subverted, true and false lose their meaning: what is true is what the group says and what the group says changes depending on the sphere in which it speaks. The officials responsible for the Hanford Nuclear Reservation provide a perfect example of this disconnect from objective reality. Despite publicly maintaining a "policy of open disclosure" (Whiteley, 1999, p. 38) requiring the "dissemination of scientific and technical information" (Whiteley, 1999, p. 38), Hanford officials conducted a massive "cover up which resulted in monumental harm to the environment" (Whiteley, 1999, p. 38). In contrast to their public reports that often "downplayed the health and environmental impact of the facility" (Whiteley, 1999, p. 37), their secret internal reports indicated that Hanford posed a grave threat to both the local environment and the health of their workers.

The Hanford case illustrates how secrecy allowed people to do bad things or at least enabled them to bypass the social safety valves that normally inhibit such activity. If the decision makers at Hanford who lied to the public had to face the social consequences of their actions, they might have behaved differently. Whiteley notes that the officials in question failed to warn the public because they "did not believe that the radiation levels posed an immediate threat to human health" (Whiteley, 1999, p. 43). It seems unlikely that area residents would espouse the same confidence had they been informed of the risks at the time; the uproar accompanying the release of such information would most probably have forced the government to address Hanford's serious pollution problems. Such public pressure, had it not been precluded because of secrecy, would have helped to keep the

Hanford officials ethically bound to the values of the larger community.

The Hanford's scientists inability to distinguish between true and false is not an isolated case. In fact, this disconnect from reality is a common consequence of the psychologically isolated environments resulting from secrecy. This disconnect occurred in other secret environments as well, such as in the community building the atomic bomb at Los Alamos, and the military hierarchy that decided to deploy fire bombs and atomic weapons in Japan. Other examples include the American officials who zealously adopted techniques from totalitarian societies in their quest to protect America from such societies. We'll examine all of these cases briefly.

Bundy provides one example of this inability to tell the truth in public when he describes the government's handling of the fire bombing campaign over Japan. He notes that while the Air Force argued "that the targets attacked were military", "this assurance had little basis in fact" (Bundy, 1988, p. 67). He goes on to explain that "every target recommended, and every one approved, was a city" (Bundy, 1988, p. 67).

In the film *The Day After Trinity*, several Manhattan Project scientists opined that they were surprised when the United States detonated an atomic bomb over Japan, and horrified at the resulting casualties. Despite intensively working for many years on the bomb, these brilliant men did not expect that it would be used against human beings. The fact that such distinguished minds could toil for so long without ever seriously grasping the most basic consequences of their work strains credibility.

The case of Joseph Rotblat furnishes another example. When he attempted to leave Los Alamos in 1944, he was confronted with a "thick dossier with highly incriminating evidence" (Rotblat, 1985, p. 18). Based on a few innocent meetings that Rotblat had cleared with his supervisor, the intelligence division at Los Alamos had concocted an elaborate fantasy world in which Rotblat was

a Soviet spy bent on smuggling plans for the atomic bomb to the Soviet Union. While Rotblat was eventually able to demonstrate that his dossier was a complete fabrication (Rotblat, 1985, p. 19), this case suggests that the intelligence group at one of the most secure American military facilities in World War II had lost all touch with reality.

The decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan yields another example of a group, meeting in secrecy, losing their connection to reality. Walzer demonstrates that American leaders had adopted a moral system in which those who started war and even war itself were responsible for all its horrors; such a calculation neatly excused them from any responsibility for how they chose to conduct the war (Walzer, 1977, p. 264–266). Truman attempted to justify the obliteration of hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians because Japan attacked Perl Harbor, a military facility (Walzer, 1977, p. 264). More importantly, by insisting that the war could only end with Japan's unconditional surrender, America's leaders created a situation where the only options available to them were killing on a vast scale, whether by atomic bombing of civilian targets or by invasion of the home islands (Walzer, 1977, p. 267–268). However, the need for unconditional surrender had no basis in reality: since Japan was "involved in a more ordinary sort of military expansion [than Nazi Germany], all that was morally required was that they be defeated, not overthrown and conquered" (Walzer, 1977, p. 268). Seen in this light, the decision to use atomic bombs, as well as the decision to demand unconditional surrender at all costs tread dangerously far from objective reality.

Bundy describes a similar disconnect as Secretary of War Stimson and President Truman made seemingly non-sensical decisions in choosing atomic bomb targets. Stimson insisted that "the industrial heart of Tokyo was military; ancient Kyoto was civilian" (Bundy, 1988, p. 79) despite General Groves' repeated explanations to the contrary. Truman's analysis is breathtaking in it's

delusion: he wrote that he would use the bomb so that "military objectives and soldiers and sailors were the target and not women and children ...the target will be a purely military one" (Bundy, 1988, p. 79). The massive contradiction implied by these statements together with the selection of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as targets could not have gone unchallenged had Truman's thought process received a more public airing.

Perhaps the most ironic cases where secrecy breeds a mental disconnect from reality are those where people, in the course of fighting evil, become what they most despise. For example, Bernstein describes the tremendous lengths that government officials were prepared to travel in order to prosecute Robert Oppenheimer. Not only did the government hand pick an inquiry board biased against Oppenheimer (Bernstein, 1982, p. 217), and violated its own regulations regarding impartiality (Bernstein, 1982, p. 219), but it refused to grant Oppenheimer's attorneys the security clearances needed to view the evidence against him, despite having easily granted a clearance to the prosecuting attorney (Bernstein, 1982, p. 215). That may not have mattered much since the government made it's case using secret FBI files that Oppenheimer and his attorneys would not have been allowed to view even if they had clearances (Bernstein, 1982, p. 218). Lewis Strauss had the government tap Oppenheimer's phone and funneled transcripts of his conversations with his lawyers to the opposing counsel (Bernstein, 1982, p. 247). Strauss also attempted "to use [FBI Director] Hoover to pressure the board into finding Oppenheimer" guilty (Bernstein, 1982, p. 247). In their rush to discredit Oppenheimer and prove his ties to the Soviet Union, investigators performed actions that were not only illegal, but completely antithetical to the values they espoused. Such behavior is far more in keeping with the dictates of a totalitarian government than with a constitutional democracy.

The officials managing the Hanford facility were also unable to see just how similar they had

become to the totalitarian enemies they were fighting against. They could not have lied to the public and their workers about the medical and environmental threats posed by their facility without having undergone a radical change in values. They had to reject the fundamental western belief in the sanctity of the individual and instead adopt the totalitarian notion that the needs and even lives of individuals are subordinate to the whim of the state. Like those rushing to destroy Oppenheimer at any cost, the Hanford officials' vision of reality had become so distorted that they could not see how their actions violated every thing they claimed to believe in. That distortion came about because these people were isolated from both the larger community and the consequences of their actions.

These cases illustrate another key mechanism by which secrecy leads groups to lose their connection with reality: isolated communities foster collective defense mechanisms. Once someone has been effectively isolated from the larger community, they can only turn to in-group members for advice, discussion, and reflection on their moral status. The isolation imposed by secrecy becomes critical for maintaining group identity because it provides the social scaffolding needed for collective defense mechanisms; one individual's conscience may eventually lead to a change of heart, but this reflective change cannot happen when everyone can rely on the group for support in the face of ethical questioning. Collective defense mechanisms protect against moral questioning from within; secrecy in general inhibits moral questioning from the larger community. The group identity suffers from cognitive dissonance as much as any one individual, but because it can draw on the collective strength of the group, it can much more effectively maintain the belief that it is doing the right thing, regardless of indications to the contrary.

Oppenheimer describes some of the defense mechanisms developed by the scientists who worked at Los Alamos: they consoled themselves by saying "war has always been very terrible", "weapons

have always gotten worse and worse", "this is just another weapon and it doesn't create a great change", and "bombings have been bad in this war" (Oppenheimer, 1980, p. 318). Philip Morrison believed a similar justification when he was assembling the bomb, saying "War is a bad thing. If you fight a war, you are going to do bad things, that's all" (Palevsky, 2000, p. 91). Morrison also opined that those in the military felt that bombing Japanese cities was "justified by the Bataan death march" (Palevsky, 2000, p. 87) and other Japanese atrocities. Rotblat, the only scientist to leave Los Alamos after Germany's surrender, claimed that the majority of scientists rationalized their involvement in the Manhattan Project by refusing to take any responsibility for how their bomb was used (Rotblat, 1985, p. 18). But as Rotblat points out, collective defense mechanisms can be institutional in nature as well as personal. After declaring his intent to leave, Rotblat was forbidden from talking with other scientists about why they remained at the project despite Germany's surrender (Rotblat, 1985, p. 18). He had to concoct a cover story and was stripped of his documents, notes and correspondence shortly after leaving (Rotblat, 1985, p. 19). Rotblat's story makes it clear that the group had institutional safeguards preventing people from holding the kinds of discussions that might compel them to leave, or at least question their decision to stay.

Most of the cases we have examined so far only became public many years after the fact; the remaining ones are different though. These more recent cases tend to involve either scientists being censored by corporations (King, 1996; Zalewski, 1997), scientists withholding research results (Marshall, 1997; Cohen, 1995), or questions of disclosure (Zalewski, 1997). While these three classes of cases seem very different, at their core, they all involve people trying to control others by controlling their access to information. We will examine these cases to see how different groups use secrecy as a means to control others.

Zalewski discusses three different cases where corporations attempted to censor researchers. All

of them involved research paid for by the corporation under a contract that gave the company the right to prohibit disclosure of the results: the right of the censor. In the first case, Dr. Betty Dong fought Boots Pharmaceuticals over the right to publish data showing that Boots' highly profitable hypothyroidism drug was just as effective as three of its much cheaper competitors (Zalewski, 1997). When Boots threatened to sue Dong if she published, she retracted her study from the Journal of the American Medical Association. However, once the Wall Street Journal released the story, "the resulting front-page scandal tarnished the reputation of Boots" (Zalewski, 1997, p. 55). The second case involves Dr. Nancy Olivieri who was studying the efficacy of an Apotex Pharmaceuticals drug in patients with thalassemia (Zalewski, 1997, p. 56). When her findings indicated the drug was not as effective as hoped, the company invoked the confidentiality clause of her contract. Olivieri eventually broke her contract by releasing a statement describing her concerns to the press (Zalewski, 1997, p. 56). Finally, the pharmaceutical company Sandoz attempted to massage research it had funded that indicated its highly profitable calcium channel blocker was only as effective as much cheaper drugs while greatly increasing the risk of stroke, angina, and heart failure (Zalewski, 1997, p. 56). Sandoz pressured the research group until four of the researchers withdrew their name from the study (Zalewski, 1997, p. 56). In all these cases, corporations attempted to censor scientists in order to prevent the public from gaining knowledge that would impact corporate profit margins.

Another form of secrecy arises when scientists refuse to make data associated with their published research publicly available. They might withhold reagents, genetically engineered organisms, or more detailed data than is usually published in journals, such as crystallography structure coordinates (Cohen, 1995). While some researchers cited logistical reasons for not sharing (Cohen, 1995, p. 1717), others cited the need to protect the investment of young researchers from competitors

while still others refused to share promptly "to avoid giving unfair advantage to commercial companies that are under no obligation to share" (Cohen, 1995, p. 1718). The primary motive appears to be the need to keep one step ahead of the competition, whether it's academic or corporate. The solutions that many have adopted are simply additional variants of secrecy: refusing to make full data available, only doing so after a delay, and preferentially making data available to researchers not in direct competition. Zalewski's description of the recent debates about disclosure in scientific publications reveals yet another connection between secrecy and control. In essence, disclosure rules compel authors to publicly acknowledge any vested interest they have in their research. Seen from that perspective, the debate about disclosure rules is really a debate about whether published authors have the right to keep their vested interests secret from their readers.

We have examined a number of cases that demonstrate how official secrecy helped create psychologically isolated environments. We have seen how people become disconnected from reality when cut off from both the consequences of their actions and the support of the larger community. We have also seen how secret environments foster this disconnect by encouraging the creation of collective defense mechanisms amidst a group identity powerful enough to override individual ethics. Finally, we have seen how in more recent cases, scientists have been trapped beneath the bane of secrecy due to corporate sponsors with censorship clauses, their own refusal to fully disclose research results to competitors, and authors' unwillingness to fully disclose vested interests to their readers.

Taken together, these cases suggest a question: why is it that none of those operating under government secrecy during and after World War II were able to break secrecy whereas information about the more recent cases is readily available? Part of the discrepancy can be explained by the nature of government versus corporate work. Since governments can imprison and execute those

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who violate secrecy regulations whereas corporations can only sue, there is more of an incentive to comply with government secrecy regulations. Beyond that, the key difference seems to be that the corporations failed to create an effective group identity. As a result, they could only compel secrecy by threatening scientists with lawsuits, funding termination and perhaps loss of prestige. Governments had the same threats at their disposal, but they did not need to make use of them since they were able to create psychological environments sufficiently isolating that scientists did not want to break secrecy. The split between cases involving control via group identity dynamics and raw coercive control (scientists being legally forbidden to publish) is illustrative of how problematic coercive control is. As the Soviet Union learned, if you put a gun to someone's head, they will fight back at every opportunity; the moment you let your guard down, they will exploit it. Scientists accidentally "leaking" critical info to the press (as probably happened in the Dong case) is a perfect example. If you can get scientists to internalize your belief system, or better yet, destroy their sense of self to the point where you can make them identify with the group completely, they will do whatever you want without any thought of fighting back; once they identify with the group, resistance to the group becomes resistance to the self, an unthinkable proposition. Until corporations learn this, they will not be able to duplicate the government's success at maintaining secrecy in science.

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