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Snowden affair highlights gap between media and public

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300 dpi SW Parra black and white illustration of man carrying large whistle past double-headed snake; can be used with stories about whistleblowers. The Fresno Bee 2007

whistleblower illustration whistle blower snake snakes corporate law government ethics white collar crime honesty betrayal traitor terrorist reporting protection, krtbusiness business, krtcrime, krtgovernment government, krtlw, krtnational national, krtworld world,

It's unwise to put too much weight on polls, but a recent survey on the Edward Snowden affair suggests better judgment among the general public than our usual opinion leaders have been able to muster.

The [national survey](#) of U.S. voters by Quinnipiac University found that by a huge margin—55 to 34 percent — respondents considered Snowden, the former National Security Agency contract employee, to be a whistleblower, not a traitor.

In what the pollsters called “a massive shift in attitudes,” voters also said the government was going “too far” in its anti-terrorism program — a dramatic swing from a January 2010 poll in which respondents, 63-25, said the government wasn't doing enough to safeguard the country.

Not all polls agree. A Pew/Washington Post [survey conducted in June](#) found 56 percent of respondents thought routinely tracking hundreds of millions of phone records was acceptable. But Pew also found weaker support for Internet monitoring. By 52-45, respondents rejected allowing the government to “monitor everyone's email and other online activities if officials say this might prevent future terrorist attacks.”

Apparently the Snowden affair sits atop a fault line in public opinion, with a substantial number of people disgruntled and suspicious about the sweeping surveillance he revealed.

Coverage of that rumbling has until recently been muted, largely because the protest has lacked

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the kind of high-profile champions that reassure the media that a cause is respectable and legitimate. Last week's hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee may signal a change, with lawmakers from both parties clearly piqued and [warning administration](#)

[representatives](#) that they must scale back their more intrusive practices.

Still, that criticism hasn't affected the overall flavor of Snowden coverage, which keys off [unremittingly harsh](#) comments, with House Speaker John Boehner calling him "a traitor" and Dianne Feinstein, who chairs the Senate Intelligence Committee, declaring his disclosures an "act of treason."

Even those who denounce the surveillance are loath to express support for Snowden. And that may put the "Beltway Bubble," as Atlantic editor Garance Franke-Ruta [observed](#), "out of step with America..."

In a posting on "journalists against journalism," [Salon's David Sirota](#) targeted The Washington Post for special attention. The Post ran a [remarkable editorial](#) about the vital importance of keeping "this naive hacker" from leaking any more NSA secrets. Since The Post was one of two of Snowden's main media outlets, the paper was hence "publicly reprimanding their own source and their own newsroom . . .," Sirota noted.

Admittedly, the Snowden affair puts established media in a quandary. Not only has he broken the law —and faces a draconian 30 years in lockup — he defiantly insists he was right to do so. He strides into the media sphere and becomes a global cause celebre, an outlaw idealist on the lam. He won't submit to U.S. justice, a rebuke that reminds the world of the post-9/11 legacy of renderings, torture and lawless confinement. He courts help from dubious regimes as if they were havens of liberty, and stays tantalizingly out of reach, making the almighty U.S. constabulary look like Wile E. Coyote.

It's hard to think of anybody in recent memory who has been so profound an embarrassment to this country's pretensions and its powers — from the Pentagon to Silicon Valley. So the news media, which are systematically dependent on those same powers for their informational privilege and cultural might, are in a bind.

Cheering him would be awkward, and yet what did he do? He furnished media with extraordinary material exposing a shadowy and legally borderline program of government snooping that was unimaginably bigger than had been acknowledged, and which annihilated years of lies about how restrained the U.S. data-gulp actually is.

A final perspective on the media's dilemma comes from another poll, this one a Pew [survey](#) gauging public perceptions about the contributions different occupations make to society. Overall rankings were much the same as in a similar poll taken in 2009 — soldiers at the top, lawyers at the bottom.

The occupation that fell most sharply in public esteem was journalism. The percentage of

respondents who said journalists contribute a lot to society fell from 38 to 28, with almost the same proportion saying journalists contribute little or nothing.

The survey was conducted in March and April, before the Snowden affair. What it may reflect, however, is the sense of drift and disconnect from democratic values that the affair illuminates. It's a moment that demands that journalists consider what they stand for. If not official accountability and personal freedom from needless intrusion, what?

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