

# THE FUTURE OF WHISTLEBLOWING AND HOW BEST TO DISSEMINATE IT



## COMMENTARY

By Dr Ian Foxley, CEO of Parrhesia

**In September, Professor David Lewis, the inaugural Chair of Parrhesia's Academic Council published his thoughts on the future of whistleblowing research [1]. He presented themes for the future of empirical research as well as some tentative research questions:**

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According to Lewis, it is critical scholars are clear when defining exactly what they mean by whistleblowing and how far it extends across and beyond the working environment. For example, not all whistleblowers are employees but all citizens have the human right to freedom of expression. Relevant academic disciplines range from industrial relations and business ethics to law and criminology, social and behavioural sciences, psychology, organisational management, politics, philosophy and economics. Lewis argues that scholars should be clear about both the aims and focus of their research. This is to ensure that it is most beneficial for those who might implement its findings either to enhance their understanding of the phenomenon or to inform the practical actions of those who need to respond to it: managers, trade unions, support agencies, law enforcement and policymakers.

Professor Lewis calls for more research into the management of whistleblowing process. This would involve analysing best practices using both international examples and those that can be found in different employment sectors. He points also to the need to assess communication methods in whistleblowing response systems, to inquire into the roles and responsibilities of all levels of management and to determine the efficacy of training all staff in whistleblowing policies and procedures.

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Having looked within the organisation, it is necessary to examine how external bodies, especially regulators and those vested with responsibility to act in an intermediary role, such as prescribed persons and trade union officials, might best perform their roles. Lewis extends this to an examination of the complementary parts played by traditional and online media and other 'alternative routes' for both disclosure and subsequent mediation and resolution.

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Unfortunately, no exploration of the whistleblowing experience could be complete without an examination of the retaliation meted out to many whistleblowers. Whistleblowing is a global phenomenon and so are the reprisals that accompany it – but how do they compare internationally and how do they compare in terms of gender, race, ethnicity and other socially differentiating characteristics? Importantly, more work is needed on how retaliation might be identified, recorded and effectively combatted, especially when such data is vital to any ensuing legal proceedings aimed at assessing compensation for detriments suffered.

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Finally, Professor Lewis turns to the dissemination of knowledge about whistleblowing, asking how we educate people about the value of whistleblowing and the protections offered. What deficiencies exist in legal frameworks, where, why and how might they best be countered? Most importantly, how effective are current activities in promoting whistleblower awareness and how might they be improved?

This brings us to Parrhesia Inc and the fundamental reasons for its inception. **Parrhesia was founded to offer greater access to areas of whistleblowing research interest, providing the mechanisms through which independent academic research can be channelled to answer the questions posed by policymakers.** It was a response to the observation that whistleblowing research only had a history of about 35 years and was a burgeoning field of academic interest. However, with the exception of the International Whistleblowing Research Network (IWRN), convened by Professor Lewis, there was little overall co-ordination of whistleblowing researchers or a coherent focus on what the problems are and how to address them. Parrhesia sought to fill this gap, **bringing like-minded scholars and practitioners together with a focus on creating better access to a body of professionally researched, well documented 'evidence' that might then be put to policymakers in order to support arguments for change.**

Allied to Professor Lewis' proposals for the future themes for whistleblowing research, Parrhesia invited its Academic Council to identify what it saw as the priorities for research. We offer them for wider discussion:

# Parrhesia's Research Priorities

## INTERSECTIONALITY AND WHISTLEBLOWING

Investigating the different experiences of female and BAME whistleblowers, and also the potential role of whistleblowing in addressing negative work environments

## THE RESTITUTIVE EFFECTS OF THERAPEUTIC COUNSELLING ON REHABILITATION OF WHISTLEBLOWERS

The effects of stress and reprisals on whistleblowers; therapeutic counselling; short and longer term impact on mental health; restitution and rehabilitation. How can we best make the person whole again?

## WHISTLEBLOWING AND PRECARIOUS WORKERS

Precarious workers tend to be poorly paid, insecure and have limited employment rights protections. The gradual casualisation of large swathes of the workforce in the last two decades, across sectors and countries may have adverse implications for the willingness of workers to speak up. What are the situational and psychological barriers and how can they be removed?

## **WHISTLEBLOWING IN EDUCATION**

From nursery to adult and higher education; the reporting of physical and cyber bullying. How is whistleblowing taught and to whom do students/ staff turn for help? Are the regulators in the sector effective? If no, why not and what can be done about it? How can we ensure that principles and practices imbued in education can be taken into the workplace?

## **AI AND WHISTLEBLOWING**

How might AI improve the advice and support available to potential and actual whistleblowers? How will it affect the speed and nature of the responses received to concerns raised? What is the impact of dehumanising the process?

## **A COST / BENEFIT ANALYSIS OF WHISTLEBLOWING IN THE UK**

Looking at both the public and private sectors, what is the impact of wrongdoing on the economy, the organisation, and the individual. What are the physical and moral costs of silence versus the benefits of whistleblowing?

## **CONSEQUENCES OF THE UK'S NON-COMPLIANCE WITH THE EU DIRECTIVE:**

How does the implementation of the EU Directive on Whistleblowing affect current UK law and practice? What is the consequential impact, possible benefits and deficiencies in the UK employment regime going forwards?

# WHISTLEBLOWING ON DOMESTIC ABUSE

How might instances of domestic abuse, and especially violence against women and girls, be reduced by improved channels for whistleblowing?

How might outsiders be able to help?

## AUTISM AND WHISTLEBLOWING

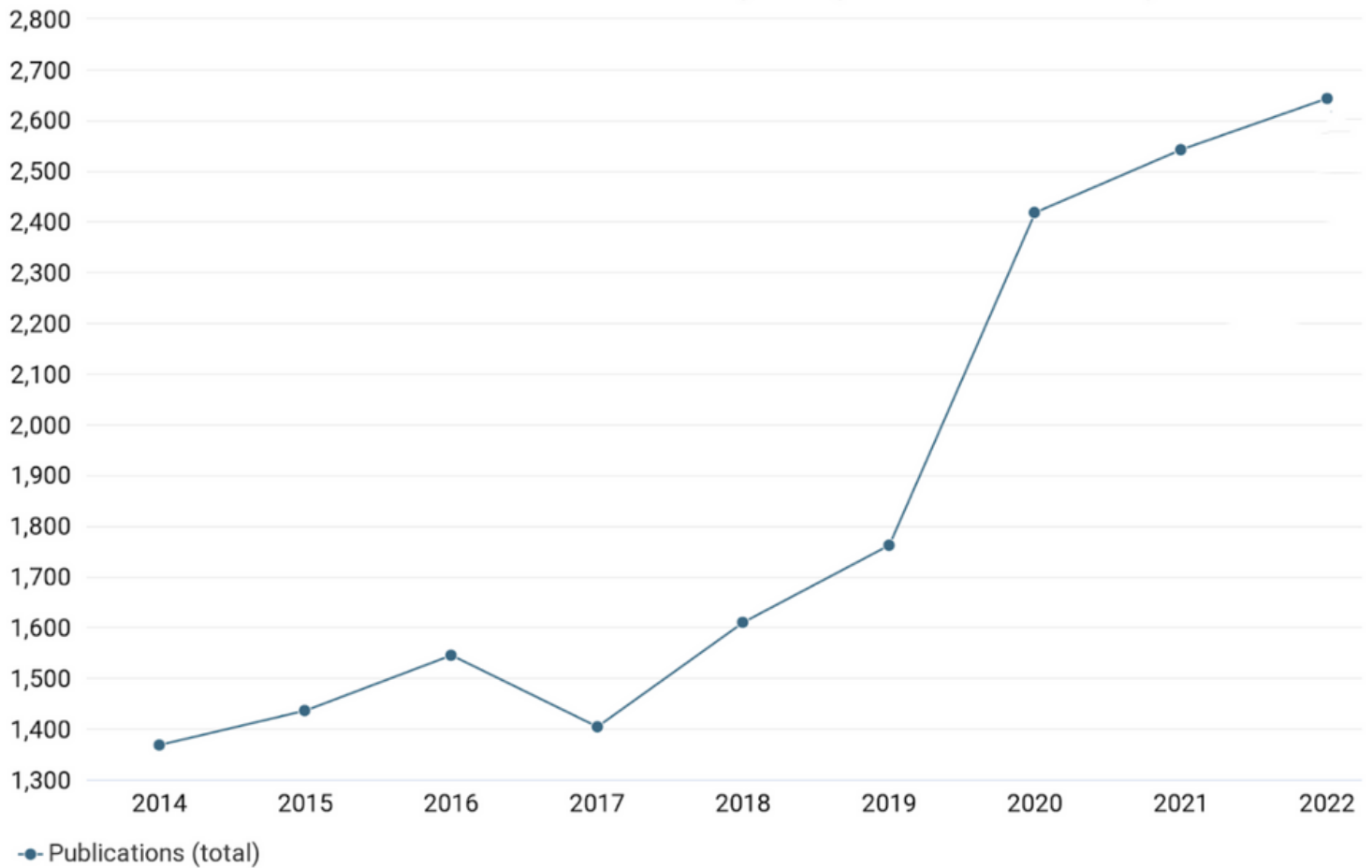
An exploration into a possible relationship between autism and a propensity to whistleblow, and the experience of autistic whistleblowers.

Part of Parrhesia's task is to raise the visibility of areas lacking in current research and in so doing, offer them up as topics suitable for nomination for ESRC (or charitable foundation) funding for research at PhD and/or Post-Doctoral study. The intention is to 'plug the gaps' in current knowledge, and provide a source of qualified and experienced principal investigators and doctoral supervisors, able to ensure the research is completed properly and disseminated as widely and effectively as possible.

## Focusing on the dissemination of research on whistleblowing

Let us therefore take up Professor Lewis' theme about the dissemination of knowledge about whistleblowing, its causes, effects and the benefits it brings. Whilst there is nascent recognition that it is an interdisciplinary academic topic, there exists no focus for the co-ordination of research which can provide a single source of reputable evidence to assist in the formulation of policy. In the public arena, the incidence of whistleblowing 'mentions in dispatches' has increased greatly over the past ten years and though whistleblowing is still a relatively small sector, articles containing the keyword "whistleblowing" or "whistleblowers" in academic journals have risen 2014 to 2022 (1368 to 2644 [an increase of 93%]), only dropping output once in 2017.

Publications in each year. (Criteria: see below)



Source: <https://app.dimensions.ai>

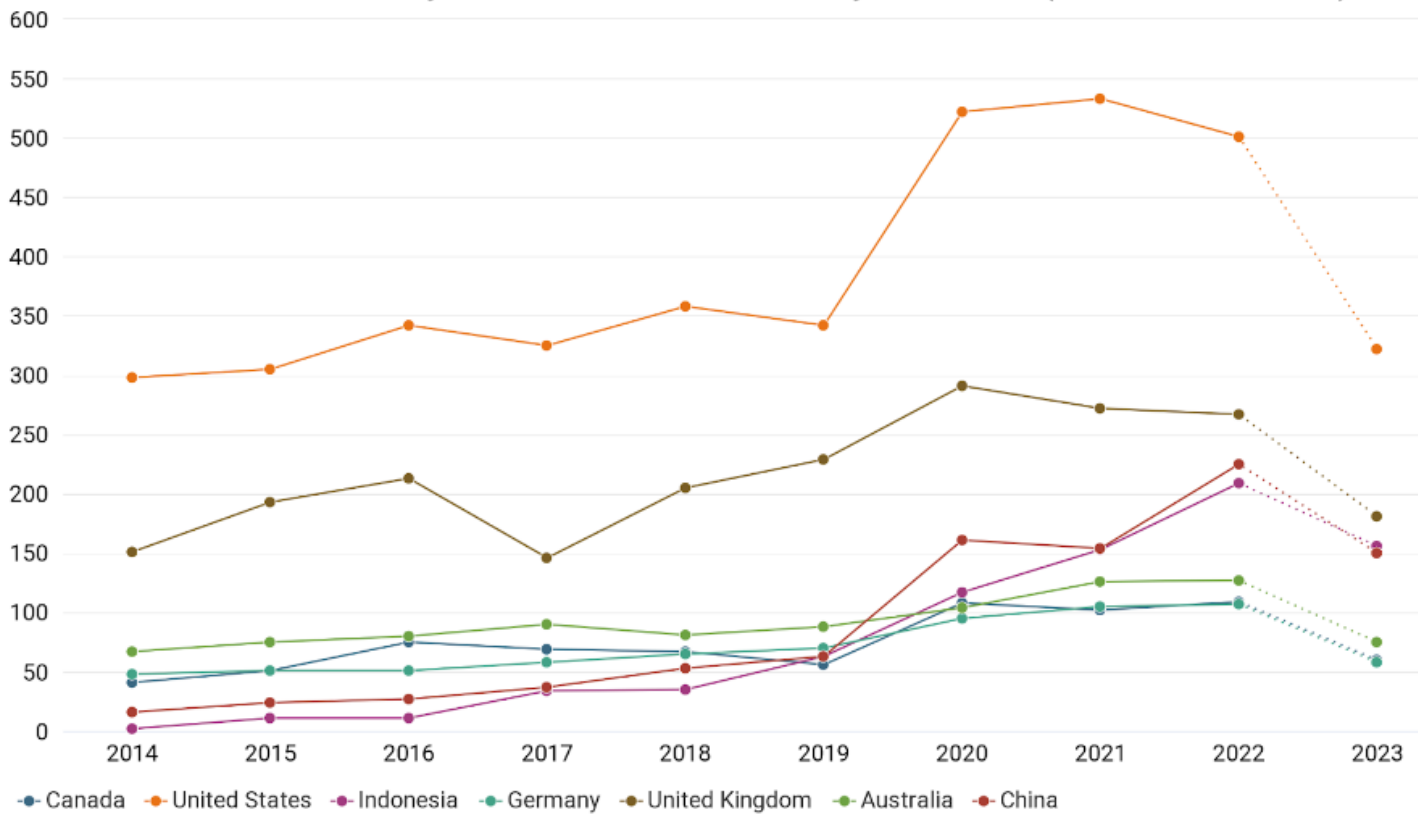
Exported: August 29, 2023

Criteria: '(whistleblowers) OR (whistleblowing) NOT (retraction)' in full data; Publication Type is Article.

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Since 2018 the Journal of Business Ethics (Springer), the BMJ, Sustainability (MDPI), Journal of Financial Crime (Emerald), and Behavioural and Brain Sciences (CUP) have published the most content on whistleblowing (160, 139, 133, 112 and 94 articles respectively). Of these only the BMJ and Sustainability increased their output last year (2022) while Behavioural and Brain Sciences published no articles on this topic in 2022 (down from 28 in 2021). All other journals have published fewer than 100 articles across 2018 to 2022. Most content comes from the United States (2,578 articles 2018-23) and the United Kingdom (1,445 articles 2018-23) but content is on the rise from Indonesia and China.

Publications in each year for the selected country/territories (Criteria: see below)



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Whilst the coverage of research categories (healthcare, management, law, philosophy, business etc.) across these journals indicates the wide interdisciplinary scope of the topic, there does not currently appear to be a journal wholly focused on the topic of whistleblowing.

Parrhesia has been looking carefully at the future of whistleblowing research, noting changes to organisational policies and practices, new technologies supporting these changes, and a growing public awareness of whistleblowing reflected in much wider media coverage and greater public interest and comment. Indeed, with the advent of the EU Directive, changes in whistleblowing law in the USA and the UK Government's Review of the Whistleblowing Framework, it is important not only to focus on what needs to be done, why and how, but also on the need to share this research most effectively.

Thus **we propose the establishment of a Journal of Whistleblowing**, or perhaps an International Journal of Whistleblowing in order to recognise its global significance. This would publish articles on whistleblowing research and practices from the widest possible range of disciplines, sectors and locations. It would require the support of a major publishing house, along with funding to get it off the ground and help it to fly. To make it a success such a project will also need the support of respected academics and senior practitioners willing to offer articles and reviews reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of the subject as well as join an editorial board.

With the **Parrhesia Papers** we intend to provide a source of ‘thought leadership’. Perhaps with a specialist whistleblowing journal we might find a global outlet that can both **bring together and focus on research and practice and deepen the public understanding of what is really going on with whistleblowing across the world?**

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[1] Based on a presentation given by Professor David Lewis at ‘The Future of Whistleblowing Research’, an event hosted at University of Galway, 30th March 2023. Attendees included scholars from South Africa, Norway, UK, Ireland, Italy, Austria, US, Sweden, and France. See <https://www.whistleblowingimpact.org/news-and-events/> for more details.

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