

# Making whistleblowing safe: a view from the Philippines

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New technologies that help human rights defenders are coming to developing countries, but those who blow the whistle need better protection.



A protest against the controversial Cybercrime Prevention Act in Manila. Demotix/J Gerard Seguia. All rights reserved.

My organization, the [Foundation for Media Alternatives](#)

, is based in the Philippines, and we work on advancing rights and freedoms in cyberspace. We assist citizens and communities in the Philippines and in Southeast Asia—especially civil society organizations and other development stakeholders—in their strategic and appropriate use of the various information and communications tools to further democratization and popular empowerment. We're also part of the Association for Progressive Communications, a global network of advocates aspiring to use information and communications technology for social justice.

I'm usually optimistic about new technologies that help human rights defenders coming to developing countries such as the Philippines, but for the past few months, we have been experiencing poor and slow Internet connections. This has been hindering activists from using anonymous platforms or even from exchanging encrypted files.

As a result, in our country, whistleblowers most often carry out their business face to face. The downside is that they have to talk or meet face to face with influential/credible people (sometimes politicians) for mainstream media to pick up their revelations.

While I think anonymous platforms for whistleblowers are very important in a post-Snowden revelation age where people fear for their safety and security online and offline, we should not forget that safe whistleblowing entails a whole lot more than technology. Whistleblowers need strong legal protections to protect them from retaliation and enable them to report offenses safely and freely.

One shouldn't and wouldn't care if the whistleblower is, for example, a member of the LGBTQI community, or has a troubled past, as long as they send a truthful and useful document.

Almost a month ago, Protection of Sources and Whistleblowers has been the topic of the report released by the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, David Kaye. The report draws a number of conclusions and urges states and international organizations to adopt or improve laws and practices and to foster the political and social environments that provide genuine protection to sources and whistleblowers. Such protections should be adopted not only by governments but also international organizations such as the United Nations, or the Council of Europe.



Nica Dumlaog (left) at the 2015 World Forum for Democracy. Council of Europe/David Betzinger. All rights reserved.

Whistleblowers should be guaranteed confidentiality and the possibility of anonymity in their reporting. National laws protecting the confidentiality of sources should be adopted. Laws guaranteeing confidentiality must also reach beyond professional journalists, including those who may be performing a vital role in providing wide access to information of public interest such as bloggers, citizen journalists” members of non-governmental organizations, authors, and academics, all of whom may conduct research and disclose information that is in the interest of the public. Protection should be based on function, not a formal title.

Whistleblowing is an important ingredient of democracy. It is a measure to balance power. In our part of the world, Asia Pacific, we are still faced with challenges, lack of democratic governance, limited transparency,

and little public participation. Freedom of information is not guaranteed. Whistleblowers, although generally frowned upon by as they counter the norms of feudal Asian societies, have historically (or herstorically) been helpful in exposing undemocratic practices such as corruption. Whistleblowers are human rights defenders too.

The whistleblowing platforms presented at this [panel](#) will help, I am sure, to expand democratic space if tweaked and implemented based on the realities and contexts faced by the people they wish to support. It's also good to note that, with an anonymous platform, one will just focus on what is exposed, rather than on the person exposing. One shouldn't and wouldn't care if the whistleblower is, for example, a member of the LGBTQI community, or has a troubled past, as long as they send a truthful and useful document.

Alongside promoting anonymous whistleblowing technologies, we should also collectively put pressure on governments to respect everyone's right to online privacy. We need to fight against the circumvention of whistleblower's anonymity through the monitoring of electronic communication or requests for private information from intermediaries.

*This post is adapted from the address given by the author during a [panel discussion](#) at the World Forum for Democracy, which was held at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg on 20-22 November 2015.*

There is an acute and growing tension between the concern for safety and the protection of our freedoms. How do we handle this? Read more from the [World Forum for Democracy](#) partnership.