

Case Study: Evaluating the NSA Whistleblower in Zero Days Through Rule Utilitarianism

Introduction

In this case study, I will use Rule Utilitarianism to evaluate whether the anonymous NSA whistleblower in Zero Days referred to in the film as “Source M” was morally justified in revealing classified information about the Stuxnet cyber operation. In the film, “Source M” faced a difficult choice: stay silent and protect national secrecy laws or speak out about a cyberweapon that had global consequences. My thesis is that, according to Rule Utilitarianism, the Whistleblower’s decision to disclose information was morally right because it promotes long-term safety, transparency, and accountability. In this essay, I will describe Rule Utilitarianism, explain the situation from Zero Days, apply the theory to the case, and finally argue what the whistleblower should have done according to this ethical framework.

Describing the Normative Ethical Theory: Rule Utilitarianism

Rule Utilitarianism is a version of utilitarian ethics that focuses on creating and following rules that maximize overall happiness or well-being for society. Instead of judging each action individually, Rule Utilitarians ask whether a general rule like people should tell the truth or people should follow the law would lead to the best outcomes if everyone followed it. The idea is that rules create stability, trust, and predictability, which ultimately promote greater long-term happiness. According to Quinn, Rule Utilitarianism is workable because it avoids the extremes of act utilitarianism, which can sometimes justify harmful actions, and it also provides clear guidance for difficult moral dilemmas by examining the consequences of universal rules rather than isolated decisions.

Describing the Situation from Zero Days

Zero Days focuses on the development, deployment, and fallout of Stuxnet, a sophisticated cyberweapon created by the U.S. and Israel to sabotage Iranian nuclear facilities. Much of the film shows how the project was kept secret, even from many people inside the intelligence community. One of the key figures is the anonymous NSA source who chose to speak with journalist Alex Gibney. “Source M” believed the government’s extreme secrecy posed risks to global cyber stability. Their dilemma was whether to obey secrecy laws and remain silent or speak out about an operation that had already spread across global networks and could influence future international cyberwarfare. By revealing information, the whistleblower risked legal punishment and public backlash, but believed the public deserved transparency about cyberweapons capable of causing world-wide harm.

Applying Rule Utilitarianism to the Situation

Rule Utilitarianism asks which rule government employees should always follow: secrecy laws or a rule that government employees should disclose dangerous government actions when they threaten global well-being would create the most overall happiness if widely adopted. If everyone always followed secrecy laws, harmful or reckless government cyber activity could continue without accountability. This rule might protect national security, but it also increases the risk of hidden mistakes, international conflict, and long-term instability. On the other hand, if the rule encouraged whistleblowing when secrecy threatens global safety, it would promote transparency, public oversight, and more responsible government behavior. Even though some secrecy is necessary, the whistleblower’s situation involved a weapon that affected millions of computers worldwide. Under Rule Utilitarianism, the second rule likely produces greater good because it prevents unchecked power and reduces the long-term harm of digital weapons.

What the Individual Should Have Done According to Rule Utilitarianism

According to Rule Utilitarianism, “Source M” should have done exactly what they did choose: transparency over silence. By revealing information about a cyberweapon program that operated without democratic accountability, they acted according to a rule that increases long-term societal well-being: whistleblowing is justified when secrecy creates large-scale risk or harm. If all government workers followed this rule, it would encourage decision makers to be more cautious about developing dangerous technologies without oversight. It would also create systems where the public and lawmakers can evaluate cyber capabilities before they cause unintended damage. Even though the whistleblower broke secrecy laws, Rule Utilitarianism supports the idea that laws should be overridden when they cause more harm than good.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Rule Utilitarianism shows that the NSA whistleblower in Zero Days acted ethically by choosing to disclose information about Stuxnet. Their actions support a rule that promotes long-term safety, responsibility, and global stability by discouraging dangerous operations conducted in absolute secrecy. When evaluating their decision through this ethical framework, the whistleblower’s choice leads to greater overall benefit for society than remaining silent. While the situation was morally complex, Rule Utilitarianism provides a clear justification for why transparency was the morally right action in this case.