

Inglorious Snitching: Adrián Lamo, Chelsea Manning and Patriotism

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The hacking community, like poets, tend to be irritable tribesmen and women. Their modus operandi functions on the stab, the enthusiastic penetration of insecure computer systems and mockery. Their role is as much to instruct as it is to disrupt.

To that end, such figures cut different forms. There is the lonesome soul finding solace in being a nuisance, or the idealist intent on revealing a compromised state of affairs (those working for Anonymous, by way of example). It was questionable whether Adrián Lamo was of the latter breed. According to his father, Mario, he lacked malice though not initiative. "Everything he did was out of curiosity." Lamo's views of [his own activities](#) suggested less a case of hacking than finding "different ways of seeing."

Dead at 37 at his Kansas apartment on Wednesday in circumstances that barely struck an interest for most scribblers of the mainstream press, Lamo established his initial claim as one who hacked the Old Gray Lady. In breaking into *The New York Times* network in 2003, Lamo proceeded to run up [\\$300,000 in data research fees](#) by means of fake usernames, essentially adding himself to the paper's payroll.

Cingular Wireless, Microsoft and Yahoo! were also accessed, the latter being notable for receiving touch-ups and satirical readjustments to news articles. After an 18 month investigation by the FBI, he was subsequently arrested and convicted for computer fraud, spending time in house arrest.

The now notorious James B. Comey, who was then the US attorney in Manhattan, was less than impressed.

"It's like someone kicking in your front door while you're on vacation and running up a \$300,000 bill on your phone, and then telling you when you arrive home that he had performed a useful service by demonstrating that your deadbolt wasn't secure enough."

It was with Chelsea Manning, formerly Bradley, with whom he struck historical, if tainted gold. Lamo's name had ventured far enough to reach the troubled army private who had, over time, amassed a sizeable trove of classified documents noting everything from brutal military engagements to diplomatic gossip in State Department cables. Lamo assumed the role of compromised confessor, drawing upon what he regarded as boasts by Manning.

Lamo, it seemed, had undergone a Damascene conversion. During the course of messaging Manning, a patriotic instinct had taken a gripping hold, though when exactly is unclear. This, from an individual who had shown little sign of it prior. Chat logs obtained via

AOL Instant Messenger were thereby surrendered to the FBI, forever marking Lamo as an informant. Manning was subsequently sentenced to 35 years in prison for leaking some 700,000 government records, a term which was commuted by President Barack Obama in January 2017.

An explanation for his motives was quick to come. In a 2011 interview that ran in the film [WikiSecrets](#), Lamo claimed a belief that Manning “couldn’t possibly have vetted over a quarter of a million documents”. She had merely assured herself “that they didn’t contain anything that would cause human harm.”

This criticism on vetting – or its absence – which has varying degrees of plausibility in the scope of information warfare, has also been levelled at WikiLeaks. Such is the distribution, and in some cases relocation, of power when it comes to revealing classified materials. Detractors prefer the deference to paternalism: only the traditional state and its operatives are fit to assess the quality of those secrets.

That aspect of harm, claims Lamo, was understood after his conviction. He was, on reflection, not merely dealing with computer systems, “just ones and zeros” but flesh and blood individuals who might be effected. He had not taken into account the “human cost”. But in becoming an informant, Lamo had decided to inflict another variant of harm – that of terrorising whistleblowers, notably to WikiLeaks, into revealing the dirty laundry of state entities.

This conformed rather neatly with the strategy outlined by the US Army Counterintelligence Center in 2008, whose [own classified, and leaked report to WikiLeaks](#), proclaimed the organisation “a potential force protection, counterintelligence, operational security (OPSEC), and information security (INFOSEC) threat to the US Army.”

A vital strategy here entailed outing, targeting and ruining confidential sources and informants. “Successful identification, prosecution, termination of employment, and exposure of persons leaking the information by the governments and businesses affected by information posted by Wikileaks.org would damage and potentially destroy this center of gravity and deter others from taking similar actions.”

In life, Lamo remained itinerant. He moved repeatedly, and remained homeless for long stretches.

“He was a believer,” claimed self-professed colleague and friend [Lorraine Murphy](#), “in the Geographic Cure. Whatever goes wrong in your life, moving will make it better.”

He certainly engendered, if postings on his Facebook profile are anything to go by, strong impressions amongst those who knew him.

“He was gifted with a brilliant curious mind that sprouted on a compassionate and loving heart,” goes a note from [Saulo](#).

His name in the battlefield of public engagement was something else. For [Julian Assange](#), he was no less an FBI snitch and poseur.

“Lamo, a fake journalist, petty conman & betrayer of basic human decency, promised alleged source [Chelsea Manning] journalistic protection, friendship and support, then sold him to the FBI.”

Lamo’s mother responded with typical maternal distress. Being in the Ecuadorean embassy, speculated [Mary Atwood Lamo](#), had denatured publisher.

“Perhaps if you dealt with what you need to personally, you might feel less mean-spirited and more able to exhibit the ‘basic human decency’ you endorse in your own words and behaviour, Mr. Assange.”

As for Lamo’s death, few eyebrows have been raised, though the conspiratorial wilderness may well dredge up something in due course. “There’s nothing suspicious about his death,” claimed Wichita police officer [Charley Davidson](#). Toxicology tests will only yield results after some weeks, and the Regional Forensic Science Center is still numb on the cause of death.

Lamo’s underreported passing suggests one object lesson: no plaques are made to the tattler, the squealer, the snitch. To them is only owed suspicion, the sense that you might well turn at any given moment. The counterfeit currency that is patriotism only goes so far. The rest is less history than a concerted forgetting.

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