
Holding the Unaccountable to Account

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I am grateful for the space provided here to write a few words about my close friend Dr Steve Wright, who sadly died far too soon at the age of 67 in 2019, and who is missed by many. Now is not the time for a full-scale assessment of Dr Steve Wright's pioneering work, which he would have wanted to be collaborative and constructively critical, but I look forward to participating in such an endeavour in due course.

Steve was a large presence, physically, intellectually, but also in spirit: he could move people and had an array of tales or stories which were hard to believe. His stories were both legion and legendary amongst students, his friends, and I suspect those he held to account, though as somebody who crossed paths with Steve before he actually knew me and we were friends, I can therefore verify that many were true and there are others would also vouch for this. As academics we often maintain a distance from our subjects; on this occasion I make no apology for straining this convention as I take an all-too-brief journey through the life of a very close friend and colleague – nor do I apologise for drawing upon writing by my good friend and colleague Professor Simon Lee and a former student whom Steve and I supervised, Dr Craig Brown (from his book *Steve Wright Spy for Peace*, Brown 2022).

Steve pursued a life of seeking to hold to account those who were largely able to be unaccountable. He left me, and others, often questioning how this was possible. How do you dialogue with those who can avoid being accountable? How do you bring those to account who do not need to enter into dialogues and stand beyond being accountable, perhaps considered above the law or even makers of those laws?

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How do you engage with those who actually deny their own existence? The arms trade, governments who interpret or apply legislation allowing themselves to act beyond questions, or an agency of the state, such as the National Security Agency (NSA), who deny their existence even to their own President, earning the epithet 'No Such Agency.' Dr Steve Wright, our friend, and a good friend of the Dialogue Society, spent most of his life in this pursuit, and with some success.

Steve was, throughout his life, a consistent voice in some dialogues that were very much unequal, a pioneer in the field of tracking the arms trade, seeking accountability from security services for their actions, and shining a powerful light on often devious and surreptitious actions of governments who created, or subverted, the very laws that they were responsible for. His methodology was precise, analytical, and accurate, creating accountable information and evidence, but as an adept and accomplished storyteller he used the raw data to paint pictures of the often very secret world inhabited by the arms trade, governments, and their 'representatives', describing unbelievable futuristic weaponry about to come to market or in development, and security systems that invaded the lives of all, and in particular those considered activists or undesirables within their own state. He could enthral students, who did not know whether to run in fear, or to consider his words just myth or fable, and overwhelm civil servants and politicians with evidence and descriptions that they found unbelievable, until they checked the facts. His work on the Technologies of Political Control – STOA Report (Wright 1998) caused consternation and brought an important debate to the European Parliament and its states, still relevant today.

It is probably worth sharing here a little of the background to Steve's life, though not too much for the sake of all who knew him! Born in Newcastle Steve studied at Manchester University for a BSc (Hons) in Liberal Studies, before undertaking his postgraduate studies at Lancaster University, at the Richardson Institute. He set out on a journey to study 'New Police Technologies and Sub-State Conflict Control.' This research, and the consequence of it, led to some of the significant and important impacts of his work. I will mention again later his impact in relation to 'non-lethal' weapons and the NSA.

Steve had the misfortune to come to the attention of the UK secret police whilst studying at Lancaster University for his PhD. As Steve tells the story in his chapter in *Human Rights and the Internet* (Hick 2000), he was undertaking some research for a friend:

I was assisting a colleague who was preparing a piece for the Sunday Times on the plethora of microwave towers that has sprung up around the UK – ostensibly there to assist us in making long-distance telephone calls. I took some pictures of the Post Office microwave

towers at the back of the university speculating that they didn't seem to have a proper function since the horns and dishes were not going North-South but to Northern Island to the west and to what might be Menwith Hill in the east. A few weeks later two carloads of secret police entered my house and undertook the first raid by special branch on a UK university.

The visit by Special Branch was part of a well-known case, the ABC (Campbell 2022) trial, relating to alleged breaches of the Official Secrets Act. Steve was not the one of the main subjects of the case and was never prosecuted. It did, however, cause considerable pain and loss for Steve, who did not complete his PhD until 1987. It might be said that the motto of Lancaster University became one that Steve lived by – as he says the ‘somewhat misleading motto of the university was “Omnibus Patet Veritas” – or “The Truth lies open to all”!’

My colleague, Professor Simon Lee, who was Vice-Chancellor at Leeds Metropolitan University (now known as Leeds Beckett University), when both Steve and I worked there, makes a very fine and well considered appraisal of Steve, which I share next. It illustrates the importance of the activist academic, which describes Steve well:

Steve Wright was a thinker of originality, rigour, and significance. These are the three criteria by which academic research in the UK is judged every seven years or so in the REF exercise. Each unit of assessment also puts forward ‘impact’ case studies. The ESRC chose Steve’s career as a prime example of such a case study.² His challenges to the arms trade and then to the surveillance industry required courage and independence of the highest order. For he was also a campaigner or, as it is sometimes put, an activist.

There has been an uneasy space between academic work and taking action in what are perceived as more direct ways to challenge those in power. Steve Wright is an exemplar of those who inhabit this space. They are often not taken as seriously as those who are solely ‘academics’ or solely ‘activists.’ This is a mistake. One lesson from Steve Wright’s life’s work is to take such people seriously. A famous essay by Ronald Dworkin in my core discipline of jurisprudence, the philosophy of law, was called ‘Taking Rights Seriously’. This tribute to Dr

2 <https://esrc.ukri.org/news-events-and-publications/impact-case-studies/exposing-international-arms-trade-and-surveillance/>

Steve Wright is therefore entitled 'Uneasy Space' with the sub-title, 'Taking Wrights Seriously'.

There are signs that this space between academia and activism is closing, with the shared concerns about the environment. This is to be applauded. It was a different era, however, and a very different context when the police arrested the then doctoral student Steve Wright in 1977 and seized his notes. It has been a different space ever since because, unlike the consensus over the environment, Steve Wright was one of very few challenging the arms trade and the surveillance state.

Over the years Steve stayed true to the University motto. In all his work he held those in power or with responsibility to account, by ensuring that ethical and moral standards were observed, by collecting the data and analysing it, and then ensuring that directly or indirectly it was applied effectively, in a dialogue with them and those accountable. I mention just three examples very briefly, but there are many more examples and stories.

The first relates to impact, and to rubber bullets. Steve undertook important and ground-breaking work on supposedly 'non-lethal weapons.' Rubber bullets were portrayed and sold as just such a weapon, though in reality proved to be lethal, and research by Steve, amongst others, proved this. But those in power did not want to hear this; they ignored evidence. Steve gave evidence at a UN Committee, filled with those who would not listen. He attempted to convince them, to show his evidence, and finally to illustrate his point, when all else failed. The story goes, from the mouth of the Chair of that Committee, that, having tried everything else Steve, a large and strong man, threw a rubber bullet at the wall. He then watched it ricochet around the room whilst the audience ducked for cover – he made an impact on them, and one on the wall of the room, which I am told caused conversation after the event and resulted in the capacity of this non-lethal technology to be reconsidered.

Over many years, and funded by a variety of charities, European funders, and research councils, Steve, along with colleagues whom he led, undertook research into the arms trade. This involved being a 'spy for peace' or in other words attending arms fairs around the world as an arms trader, gathering data secretly, and collating this. This was a high-risk job: the people on whom Steve spied were wealthy, powerful, amongst the best connected, and not keen on their secrets being shared. What Steve saw, what he documented, was the entrails of the official and unofficial world of arms trading, the current weapons and tools of security, and the future plans and new technologies that were coming. He often described this work as that of a 'secret squirrel', building perhaps the most comprehensive data collection on arms, techno-

logies, and security tools in the world. It informed the activist world, allowed questions about weapons and security to be well-informed in challenging parliaments, and functioned as a vital tool helping perpetrators of war crimes and human rights abuse to be held to account – a dialogue of holding to account, wherever possible, and shining light on those who refuse or are beyond accountability.

As a final example I will return to the secret police raid on Steve, and as he would say, it was worth the twenty years' wait to hold them to account – this time it was personal! Steve, through the organisation he then led, the Omega Foundation, was awarded a contract by the Scientific and Technical Options Assessment Unit (STOA) of the European Parliament. The work was broadly to cover the technologies of political control (Statewatch 2023), including state real time surveillance. The report tells the story, but this was very much about the international surveillance systems, operated secretly by a group of states who had the capacity to watch and listen to all of us, a global listening and watching service – operated by the National Security Agency, with the cooperation of the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The pictures that Steve had taken at Lancaster University were a part of the global technology backbone of this global surveillance system. The reporting of this enabled the European Parliament, governments in Europe, and around the world to hold those spying on them to account – evidence indicated the level of interference was not just directed at miscreants but supported interference in political matters and in allowing huge trade deals to be interfered with. The NSA were no longer 'No Such Agency' and were, at least to some extent, made accountable. The full story and the impacts are available in the report mentioned above, and in Steve's own words in his chapter in *Human Rights and the Internet* (Hick 2000).

The legacy that Steve leaves is manifold. He leaves tools and techniques for gathering information, has developed a huge data system that accounted for arms trading and has impacted policy and practical changes. Amongst his later work was the pressure to ensure that any funding by the European Community relating to weapons and security would have to undergo an ethical evaluation prior to being awarded. He has inspired friends, and more importantly students, to carry forward the concept that 'Truth lies open to all' and exemplified how one creates a dialogue with those who do not listen. He would probably describe this as 'political *jujitsu*' but, whatever it is called, it exemplifies integrity, passion, ethical and moral values, and a determination to create a means of speaking to those who do not listen.

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