
REALIS-ESSAY-036

What the Move Finds

What Ellsberg Knows About Pathway and Position

Version 1.0 | Issued by Realis Institute



REALIS
INSTITUTE

realisinstitute.com

Daniel Ellsberg spent three years inside the system before he decided the system had no pathway.

He had worked at the RAND Corporation, advised the Pentagon, and helped compile the classified history of US involvement in Vietnam that would become known as the Pentagon Papers. He understood the architecture from inside. He had watched internal dissent route into classified reports that went nowhere, into policy recommendations that were received and filed, into the machinery that consumed signals and produced continuation.

In 1969 he began copying the documents.

He had been speaking for years. He was asking whether there was an architecture outside that could receive what the inside had neutralized.

He chose the press. The New York Times published the first installment on June 13, 1971. The Nixon administration moved immediately to suppress it. The Supreme Court ruled 6-3 to allow continued publication fifteen days after the first page ran. The presses had already been running.

He chose the press. What made it a pathway was not the choice.

The First Amendment was a legal architecture that existed independently of Ellsberg, independently of the Times, independently of the political pressure bearing down on both. He had moved into a position where a pre-existing structure could act. Finding a pathway and creating one are different things.

Most people who make the same attempt arrive somewhere else.

Harry Markopolos had spent nine years submitting documented evidence to the SEC that Bernard Madoff was running a fraud. The submissions were precise. The evidence was sufficient. The architecture received them and converted them, each time, into something it could handle. A concern. An inquiry. A closed file. In 2008 he was still outside, still transmitting, still producing no consequence.

The difference between Ellsberg and Markopolos was what existed on the other side of the step.

Ellsberg moved into an architecture with a mechanism: the First Amendment, the courts, the specific legal doctrine that constrained even a president from suppressing publication. The mechanism existed before he arrived. It required him to reach it.

Markopolos moved into a regulatory architecture that received his signal without a mechanism capable of converting it into consequence. The SEC existed. The filings were accepted. The pathway stopped there.

Frances Haugen resigned from Facebook in May 2021 and left with tens of thousands of internal documents. She had spent two years watching internal escalation produce no structural change. She understood the architecture she was leaving. She was precise about where she was going.

She chose the press, the SEC, and the congressional committee. The Wall Street Journal published. She testified. The documents spread to a consortium of news organizations and to regulators across multiple jurisdictions.

What followed was uneven.

In Europe, the Digital Services Act passed. The law established oversight requirements, transparency obligations, and enforcement mechanisms for large platforms. Haugen had testified before the European Parliament in November 2021 and again in May 2022 when the political agreement was reached. Her documents had been in the process. The European regulatory architecture had existed, the DSA had been in development, and her signal reached it at the moment it could be received.

In the United States, the core architecture did not change. Section 230 remained. The proposed legislation introduced in response to her testimony did not pass. The SEC had received her complaints but by early 2022 had not opened a formal investigation. Hundreds of civil lawsuits accumulated, routed through state attorneys general, using her documents as evidence. That pathway was slower, distributed, and still unresolved.

The same documents. The same person. The same signal. Different outcomes by jurisdiction, because different architectures existed to receive it.

She had found a field of architectures with different properties. Some could convert her signal into consequence. Others received it and absorbed it.

Ellsberg spent years inside before he moved. Markopolos was outside from the beginning and stayed there. Haugen left deliberately and strategically. The position is not the variable.

What varies is whether the receiving architecture has a mechanism that can convert signal into consequence, and whether that mechanism is reachable from where the signal is sent.

Markopolos was persistent across nine years. Haugen was precise across two. Ellsberg spent years copying documents at personal risk. The mechanism did not respond to those properties. It responded to whether it existed and whether the signal could reach it.

People who encounter systems where signal cannot produce consequence naturally attempt to reposition themselves. They leave. They escalate. They build parallel records. They go to the press. They testify. The move is rational. The current position has demonstrated it does not work. Another position might.

The person in motion cannot see what awaits at the destination. They can assess the external architecture as best they can from inside. They carry their signal toward a mechanism they cannot verify in advance.

Ellsberg found one. The legal architecture was already there.

Markopolos found an architecture with no mechanism capable of acting on what he was sending.

Haugen found a field with uneven properties: consequence in some jurisdictions, continuation in others, lawsuits still accumulating.

The move is not the variable. What the move finds is.

This essay is part of the Realis Signal and Consequence Series. It applies concepts from Structural Orientation Theory, a framework developed at Realis Institute for understanding how agents and institutions behave when sustained pressure makes judgment, verification, and authority load-bearing. For more, visit realisinstitute.com.