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News in the Networked Era

CHARLIE BECKETT
with JAMES BALL

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C O N T E N T S

P R E F A C E

Emily Bell

When transparency organization WikiLeaks announced it held a vast trove of leaked US diplomatic cables in November 2010 it provoked a global political and journalistic maelstrom. In a digitized age of data capture and dissemination, where vast amounts of information can be published and shared among networks of citizens and activists without the mediation of the press, WikiLeaks raises fundamental questions about journalism, its processes and its role in a modern society.

For some, the work of Julian Assange, WikiLeaks editor-in-chief, and his collaborators, represented a remaking of the digital fourth estate which enjoyed none of the compromised closeness of relations between power and the press. For others it bordered on a terrorist organization, using its lack of accountability and its wide network of technologically capable followers to disrupt the orderly running of society. Wherever you sit on this spectrum of opinion, it is undeniable that the leaked cables, and the previous work of WikiLeaks, deserve close and proper examination. WikiLeaks' roots, its development and the consequences of its actions provide lessons for journalism, for regulators, for governments and for citizens. This timely book by Charlie Beckett and James Ball does not try to encompass all aspects of this sprawling narrative but wisely focuses on the portion most relevant to journalism.

What followed the sensational publication of the largest cache of confidential government documents in history was a dust cloud thrown up by the myriad of organizations

rushing either to negate or to build on the extraordinary disclosures. Some of the questions which dominated debate at the time – such as ‘is WikiLeaks journalism?’ – obscured the more complicated questions about what the coming of age of this alternative media actually means. Up to this point, many of the technological changes being wrought on the media industry were interpreted principally in terms of how they affected business models. The key issues of what technological progress enables, and the types of organization it favours, were largely lost. The rhizomatic nature of WikiLeaks, its technical capabilities, its stateless structure provide a strong illustration of what type of organization can be supported by this new ecosystem. Mainstream media were confronted with an entity which outstripped their capacity to analyse and host documentation, which adopted a more liberal, even libertarian attitude to privacy, championed a radical transparency agenda and attracted support from many who saw the established press as inadequate and failing.

In tackling both the historical context of WikiLeaks and examining the ongoing questions that it raises, Charlie Beckett and James Ball provide us with a valuable framework for thinking about the wider future of journalism, disclosure and public information. As the book notes, without a geographic location and lying outside national legal jurisdictions, WikiLeaks has an ‘unreplicated legal freedom, but also a less-reported but similarly liberating degree of ethical and moral flexibility’. The book takes a dispassionate look at the chronology of events and adds an analytical dimension to the story.

As the authors state : ‘The challenge for government and the news media is how to cope with the variable geometry of journalism and regulation on the Internet.’

The vivid illustration WikiLeaks provides of the old adage that regulation can never keep pace with technology is accompanied by the darker truth outlined by many leading

thinkers in this area that journalistic freedoms are not a given in the new networked environment. In fact, as the book outlines, the opposite might be true. We saw how, through withdrawal of platform and payment services from corporate providers, WikiLeaks was thrown back onto the power of the network to continue publishing. When the infrastructure which supports journalism is owned entirely by companies which at their heart are free of a journalistic mission, the consequences are troubling and potentially threatening for the operation of a free press.

The relationship between media and their audience, journalism and its subjects, government and transparency are all in a state of enforced renegotiation. WikiLeaks' abrupt and destabilizing intervention is one which will inform these ongoing discussions for a generation. It is heartening that authors with the insight of Beckett and Ball should be helping to frame and guide this discussion at a time when the issues are still vital and alive.

INTRODUCTION

WikiLeaks is the most challenging journalism phenomenon to emerge in the digital era. The stories it has broken have been compared to historic scoops such as the Pentagon Papers that revealed that President Johnson's administration had lied about the conduct of the Vietnam War. The model it created is a radical development in journalism story-telling on a par with the creation of a new genre like blogging. It has provoked anger and enthusiasm in equal measures, from across the political and journalistic spectrum. WikiLeaks poses a series of challenges to the status quo in politics, journalism and theories of political communications. It has compromised the foreign policy operations of the most powerful state in the world. It has caused the most mighty news organizations to collaborate with this relatively tiny editorial outfit. Yet it may also be on the verge of extinction.

Its use of new technologies and the way it puts information into the public domain forces us to reconsider what journalism is and its moral purpose in contemporary global politics. What are the responsibilities of a journalist? What are the limits on freedom of expression? What are the best forms for political media in the Internet age? How far does the public's 'right to know' extend?

WikiLeaks is inherently unstable as a concept and a practice. It has changed over its decade-long life. Its very name suggests a kind of open, participatory activity that it has never properly realized. Indeed, its current direction is taking it ever further from the Wiki model. At the time of writing it is on the threshold of a new phase that might bring expansion or dissolution. The status of its founder Julian Assange is subject to legal challenge at a personal level as well as for WikiLeaks' actions as a whole. Other

similar organizations have now sprung up around the world, with versions also emerging in mainstream media. So, as with so many online innovators before it, WikiLeaks' real significance may be what follows in its wake, rather than its short, turbulent history.*

WikiLeaks has deliberately resisted easy definition. There has always been a gulf between what the world thought WikiLeaks was and the reality. Assange and his associates often encouraged this discrepancy, as they were always keen to exaggerate the resources and potential of the organization. Mainstream journalists were surprisingly keen to accept the more dramatic representation. At times media coverage of WikiLeaks made it look like SPECTRE, the evil secret empire in the James Bond films, with Assange as Blofeld, commanding armies of radical data-journalists ready to bring down Western Democracy with one push of a red 'publish' button. In fact, it was a ramshackle, ad hoc organization that often struggled to stay online.

When examined critically, WikiLeaks itself is not a revolutionary idea. It is best seen as a radical new hybrid combining 'hacktavism' with some of the traits of more traditional investigative journalism. In the end, its challenge to orthodoxy might reside in its extra-legal status rather than the rather vague anti-hegemonic world-view of Assange and his associates. Its cross-national servers and network of thousands of 'mirrored' sites duplicating its content have created a new kind of publisher of last resort.

WikiLeaks should be seen as a significant part of the current reshaping of the fourth estate. It is a prototype for the shift from a closed, linear structure to a more open, networked and collaborative process. Information flows are changing. Control over what the public knows is being exercised and resisted in new ways. The traditional model for the relationship between authority, media and citizen is no longer sustainable. Of course, that does not mean that

power will inevitably be redistributed in a more equitable or transparent way. But WikiLeaks is one of many new forms of political communications that offer new opportunities for a reshaping of democratic discourse and, potentially at least, of politics itself.

This book is a collaboration between two journalists. Charlie Beckett had a conventional mainstream media career and now runs Polis, a think-tank that acts as a forum for public debate about journalism and a centre for research into contemporary international news media at the London School of Economics. James Ball worked for WikiLeaks and is now an investigative journalist specializing in data at the *Guardian* newspaper in Britain. We aim to describe the history of WikiLeaks in terms of its significance for journalism, both as an evolving practice and in relation to its wider theoretical and conceptual context. We will explain why WikiLeaks matters for anyone interested in news media: as practitioners, consumers or analysts.

This is not a definitive 'insider' account or a detailed history of WikiLeaks, though it will give the essential chronology. The story is by no means over, so inevitably we are describing a narrative that is constantly developing beyond the date of publication of this book. Nor is it a biographical analysis of Julian Assange – although it is impossible to separate his personality and career from WikiLeaks generally. Instead, it will situate the meaning of WikiLeaks and its history in relation to its wider impact and importance. We will look at WikiLeaks as a particular phenomenon but also as part of a wide-ranging phase of journalism reconstruction, innovation and change.

The book is set out in four chapters. Each one first tells the story and then describes the meaning of WikiLeaks at that point in its history. Each section looks at a different period of WikiLeaks: the creation and early phase; the major Afghan, Iraq and Embassy cable leaks; the legal

battle and struggle for survival; and finally an examination of the future for WikiLeaks and its significance in the context of emerging forms of political communication. Each chapter will start with a brief introduction to the themes, followed by a substantial narrative that will set out the key events. Then there will be a discussion of the significance of WikiLeaks' activities in that period and an analysis of its nature and impact.

So in the first section we examine where WikiLeaks comes from and the landscape into which it emerged. We will trace its roots in the 'hacktavist' campaigners who sought to penetrate into closed corporate or governmental information systems to extract data. Some hackers did this for the challenge, for profit or for fun, but others because they had political goals. Assange was personally connected into a loose network of 'cypherpunk' computer activists who shared technological information, but who also conducted a lively conversation about the ethics of the Internet. This was the period for which we have early written evidence of Julian Assange's ideological outlook. We can see how WikiLeaks itself is set up on 4 October 2006 with the 'whistle-blower' model. As well as technical problems in terms of storage, processing and security, there are immediately legal and ethical issues that arise, partly because of the special nature of WikiLeaks as a platform for disclosure.

One of its first stories, the revelations about the widespread nature of corruption in Kenya's national elite, for example, showed how it was able to exploit its trans-national status to override state controls in order to put highly controversial information into the public domain. It could publish an explosive secret report that Kenyan media did not have access to or did not feel able to make public for fear of reprisal. Within a year, it replicated this feat in the Western world, publishing a report on the British oil

company Trafigura that the UK media were barred from reporting due to legal restrictions.

WikiLeaks was briefly shut down by an injunction after it published details of the alleged illegal activities of a branch of a Swiss bank. But through a process of 'mirrored' websites created by supporters it was, in effect, able to be damned and to publish. The injunction was eventually overturned but WikiLeaks had shown and would continue to demonstrate that it was able to operate with impunity. It has no home base and no legal entity in any one country and so effectively had become what Jay Rosen called the world's 'first' stateless media organization.[1] While Assange was living out of a suitcase, WikiLeaks was living in cyberspace. It had its best-known physical servers in Sweden, but its networks of supporters meant it existed everywhere and nowhere.

We will then analyse what is new about WikiLeaks in this phase and in what ways it is a challenge to alternative media, to mainstream media and to power itself. First, we will examine how Assange's project fits into existing ideas of disruptive, non-traditional, non-commercial or unsubsidized news media. Is it a new form of counter-cultural, anti-hegemonic journalism? We argue that it begins as an evolving, protean form of alternative media. In its practice and structure it is self-consciously apart from mainstream media with a declared radical political outlook. It uses new technologies and novel organizational methods. It adapts but also rejects other alternative media paradigms.

It did have guiding principles: to protect sources, to publish everything. It is at this point that some of the core ethical questions arise. The most basic was how it could publish material that it did not know was genuine. Despite public statements to the contrary, documents were validated in a very informal way. Not everything that has been given to WikiLeaks has been published yet, but when

it was, at this point in its history, it was published in full. In fact, throughout its history, no-one has ever successfully questioned the authenticity of any document published by WikiLeaks. But it is clear that in the initial stages, few of the more ‘responsible’ editorial checks and balances of mainstream media were observed at WikiLeaks.

WikiLeaks in this early phase was evolving, however, and in some ways towards a more recognizable model of journalism. The Collateral Murder video filmed by the crew of an American Apache helicopter as they shot a group of Iraqis – including two Reuters employees – was a seminal moment. WikiLeaks released all 39 minutes of the cockpit footage on YouTube. But they also released a highly edited version with subtitles, graphics and introductory statements. They commissioned two journalists, Kristinn Hrafnsson and Ingi Ingason Ragnar, to visit Iraq to interview victims’ families. It was a highly partisan but recognizably journalistic documentary film.

We will see how this contrasts with mainstream journalism, which at that time was grappling with the implications of the new digital communications environment. Mainstream news media in the West are facing a business crisis as their sources of revenue are eroded by the Internet. At the same time new online news sources are emerging that offer information directly to the public for free, anytime they want it. Bloggers and social networks are also generating ‘journalism’ – usually for free – that is competing with their product. More fundamentally, the Internet is challenging the role of mainstream media in the mediation of politics. The way that traditional mass media framed political narratives and the issues that they chose to put on the agenda is being questioned afresh.

Then we will analyse how much of a challenge WikiLeaks was at this time to those in authority. Julian Assange had a world-view of power as a ‘conspiracy’ or network. This could be disrupted by breaking the control of those in

authority over information. He argued that revelations of secret material would lead to political reaction by an outraged public. The Collateral Murder video release was the key test case of this theory. It made graphically visible the actions of power in a way that mainstream and alternative media had arguably failed to do. Yet, along with the other leaks in this period, it was not having the widespread political impact that Assange had hoped for. While reaction from the US administration was angry, there was no perceptible impact on either policy or public opinion. WikiLeaks now had a model and a strategy of sorts, but its effect was relatively limited.

The second chapter of this book will look at WikiLeaks as a much more potent challenge to power as well as to journalism. In 2010 the US Department of Defense paid WikiLeaks the compliment of a report outlining how to deter the website's activities. WikiLeaks obtained and published a leaked copy. It showed how significant WikiLeaks was now politically. The Department of Defense was proved more right to be worried than even they could have anticipated when WikiLeaks produced a series of disclosures that took its operations to an unprecedented scale. The Afghan war logs, the Iraq war logs and the Embassy cable leaks were the biggest acts of unauthorized information disclosure ever undertaken. Around 750,000 documents were involved, many of which have still to go through the publication process.

The sheer volume was important. It meant that, instead of a conventional one-off scoop, there has been a process of revelation. This makes it impossible for any one person to understand its full complexity. It may even have reduced the effect of individual disclosures by swamping the audience with a surplus of information. However, it has created a sustainable, continuing process of accountability that challenges the way power works as well as authority itself. It made visible – literally in the case of the video – the

way that governments think and act away from media scrutiny. Many of the revelations had direct consequences, although the degree to which that happened has been debated. Specific revelations – such as the decision by the US to spy on UN officials – were substantial and new. Other information, such as the corruption of Tunisia's President, may have played a small role in that country's uprising in early 2011. Military and intelligence operations were allegedly compromised by WikiLeaks' revelations. Certainly, procedures around intelligence and information-sharing have been changed in response. Our understanding of the nature of war and diplomacy has been enhanced. Journalism's role as the provider of the first draft of history was deepened.

The extraordinary extent of these revelations exposed the relative failure of much of conventional media to hold power to account. Even without resorting to theories of manufactured consent, WikiLeaks made it clear that traditional journalism is severely limited in its scope. It is constrained by commercial, technical, legal and cultural boundaries that WikiLeaks was happy and able to cross. WikiLeaks demonstrated that investigative journalism could go much further using new technologies, especially when combined with what some of its mainstream media collaborators have described as intellectual and ethical 'recklessness'. This in turn challenges conventional liberal democratic notions of the settlement of power between media and politicians as a mutually responsible process.

At the same time WikiLeaks itself was becoming networked into mainstream media across the globe as it shifted from isolated whistle-blower to collaborative investigator and publisher. In this phase WikiLeaks can be seen to be an example of a 'Networked Journalism' organization. It uses disruptive techniques from citizen journalism and exploits the potential of the new data journalism. But it combines this with a partnership

relationship with mainstream media organizations such as the *New York Times*, the *Guardian* and *Der Spiegel*. This process was, in fact, instigated by a traditional investigative journalist, Nick Davies of the *Guardian*. Despite objections on many issues by Julian Assange, the nature of the project was also extensively shaped by the mainstream media partners. This strained but effective relationship gave WikiLeaks access to mass audiences and the editorial resources of elite Western media.

We then analyse how WikiLeaks in this phase relates to ethical ideas about journalism. How does it conceive of its position in respect of the rights and responsibilities that are supposed to characterize the relationship of mainstream media to wider society? How does WikiLeaks deal with expectations that it will avoid harm, attempt to tell truth and hold power to account? This period of its greatest success also highlights some of the tensions and even contradictions inherent in WikiLeaks. For example, it was clear that the mainstream media journalists had quite different standards for redacting information that could have put people's lives at risk. According to the *Guardian*, 'They had it coming' was Assange's response to the prospect of Afghani informants being identified and targeted. In contrast, both Bill Keller (*New York Times*) and Alan Rusbridger (the *Guardian*) were prepared to talk to the authorities in advance, albeit in very general terms, about what was being published.

In the third chapter of the book, we look at the latest phase of WikiLeaks and what it means as a model for journalism. The arrest of Assange, the fight back by him and his supporters and the splits in WikiLeaks dominate the most recent narrative around WikiLeaks. A series of books have given different personal perspectives on what happened, but also some immediate judgements of its significance. Putting aside the personal issue of the legal process, the (almost) unravelling of WikiLeaks does tell us