

//Geert Lovink

Techno-Politics at WikiLeaks


“This is the first real info war, and you are the soldiers.” John Perry Barlow

Disclosures and leaks have featured in all eras, but never before has a non-state or non-corporately affiliated group done anything like WikiLeaks. *(1) Founded in late 2006, WikiLeaks gained global notoriety throughout 2010 in four waves: the first in April was the release of a video from a US helicopter’s cockpit recording the killing of Iraqis (entitled *Collateral Murder*), followed by the *Afghan War Logs* (91,000 documents) and then the *Iraq War Logs* (391,000 files), all of which were finally eclipsed in the fourth wave by the publication of 250,000 United States diplomatic cables. With “Cablegate” posting millions of documents online morphed from a quantitative into a qualitative one. Never before has a net activist initiative been able to sack ambassadors and ministers, worldwide.

When WikiLeaks hit the mainstream in April 2010 there was little knowledge of things to come. Its network, composed of a handful of core members surrounded by dozens of loosely connected supporters was without a brick and mortar office. It had just recovered from major internal restructuring in late 2009 when it had to take servers offline and face near bankruptcy. During this growth spurt, or perhaps we should say crisis, the “wiki” aspect was dropped and WikiLeaks started to centralise around the personality of its founder, the Australian hacker and internet activist Julian Assange. This chapter examines the organisational implications of decisions made at this moment, in the calm just before the media storm, arguing, to rephrase the anti-globalization movement’s slogan, that Another WikiLeaks is Possible. By way of digging into strategic issues concerning Wikileaks in particular, I will present a techno-materialist reading of leaking electronic documents in the late Web 2.0 era.

The Power of Puny Players

WikiLeaks’ disclosures are the consequence of the dramatic spread of IT use due to plummeting costs, which can be broken down into three elements: chips and hardware, bandwidth, and, most striking of all, storage. *(2) We do not need to be members of the Ray Kurzweil (“singularity is near”) cult or buy into George Gilder’s conservative agenda to understand the importance of the ever-growing speed of semi-conductors, cheap bandwidth and stunning storage capacities of small hard drives and USB sticks that all the while keep dropping in price. *(3)

Also contributing to Wikileaks’ activities is the reality that safekeeping state and corporate secrets—never mind private ones—has become difficult in an age of instant reproducibility and dissemination. Not only are classified embassy documents proving hard to protect, but an overwhelming portion of leaked material is raw data, messy collections of folders with countless versions, missing emails, downloaded pdfs, excel sheets and power-pointless presentations. A new branch of science called e-discovery, or digital forensics, has developed expertise on retrieving, opening and classifying a growing variety of digital evidence (see Wikipedia a)  (* 6). WikiLeaks is symbolic of this transformation in the “information society” at large, a mirror of things to come. So while one can look at WikiLeaks as a (political) project and criticise it for its modus operandi, it can also be seen as the pilot phase in the evolution towards a far more generalised culture of anarchic exposure beyond the traditional politics of openness and transparency.

For better or worse, WikiLeaks skyrocketed into the realm of high-level international

politics. Out of the blue it became a full-blown player both on the world scene as well as in the national spheres of certain countries. Small player as it is, by virtue of its disclosures WikiLeaks appears on a par at least in the domain of information gathering and publication with governments or big corporations. At the same time it's unclear whether this is a permanent feature or a temporary, hype-induced phenomenon—WikiLeaks appears to believe the former, which more and more likely is the case. A puny non-state and non-corporate actor, WikiLeaks nonetheless does not believe it is punching above its weight in its fight against the US government and has started behaving accordingly. One might call this the “Talibanisation” stage of the postmodern “Flat World” theory, when scales, times and places are declared largely irrelevant.

What counts and disturbs to the point of boredom is the celebrity momentum and intense accumulation of media attention. WikiLeaks manages to capture that attention by way of spectacular information hacks, where other parties, especially civil society groups and human rights organisations, are desperately struggling to get their message across. Thanks to Cablegate documents, items that have simmered in the margins for years such as Shell's role in Nigeria, the human rights situation and pollution there suddenly make front-page headlines. While civil society tends to play by the rules and seek legitimacy from dominant institutions, WikiLeaks' strategy is populist insofar as it taps into public disaffection with mainstream politics. WikiLeaks bypasses this Old World structure of power and goes to the source of political legitimacy in today's info-society instead: the rapturous banality of the spectacle. WikiLeaks brilliantly puts to use the “escape velocity” of IT, using IT to leave IT behind and rudely erupts the realm of real-world politics. Political legitimacy for WikiLeaks is not graciously bestowed by the powers that be.

In the ongoing saga called *The Decline of the US Empire*, WikiLeaks enters the stage as the slayer of a soft target. It would be difficult to imagine it inflicting quite the same damage to the Russian or Chinese governments, or even to the Singaporean—not to mention their “corporate” affiliates. In Russia or China, such disclosure would first need to surmount huge cultural and linguistic barriers, not to mention purely power-related ones. In that sense, WikiLeaks in its present manifestation remains a typically “western” product and cannot claim to be a truly universal or global undertaking.

Beyond the Conduit/Content Debate

A central difficulty in defining WikiLeaks is whether the organisation operates as a content provider or as a simple conduit for leaked data—a question that is unclear even to the WikiLeaks people themselves (the impression is that they see it as either/or, depending on context and circumstances). This, by the way, has been a common problem ever since media moved online en masse and publishing and communications became services rather than products. Assange cringes every time he is portrayed as an editor-in-chief, yet WikiLeaks says it edits material before publication and checks documents for authenticity with the help of hundreds of volunteer analysts. Content versus carrier debates of this kind have been on-going for decades among media activists, with no clear outcome. Instead of trying to resolve the inconsistency, it might be better to look for fresh approaches and develop new critical concepts for a hybrid publishing practice involving actors far beyond professional news media. This might be why Assange and his collaborators refuse to be labelled in terms of old categories (journalists and hackers, for instance) and claim to represent a new *Gestalt* on the world information stage.

The steady decline of investigative journalism caused by diminished funding is an undeniable fact. Journalism these days amounts to little more than outsourced PR remixing. The continuous acceleration and over-crowding of the so-called attention

economy ensures that there is no longer enough room for complicated stories. The corporate owners of mass-circulated media are increasingly disinclined to see the workings and politics of the global neoliberal economy discussed at length. Many journalists themselves embrace the shift from information to infotainment which makes it difficult to publish complex stories. WikiLeaks enters this state of affairs as an outsider enveloped by the steamy ambiance of “citizen journalism”, DIY news reporting in the blogosphere, and ever-faster social media like Twitter.

What WikiLeaks anticipates, yet has so far been unable to organise, is the crowd sourcing of the interpretation of its leaked documents. Since mid-2010 that work is done by journalists of a few “quality” news media who further investigate selected cables, working under a deadline. Later, academics might pick up the scraps and tell the stories behind the closed gates of publishing stables. But where is the networked critical commentariat? Certainly, we are all busy with our minor critiques, but the fact remains that WikiLeaks generates its capacity to irritate the big end of town precisely because of the transversal and symbiotic relationship it has with established media institutions. There’s a lesson here for the multitudes—get out of the ghetto and connect with the Oedipal other. Therein lies the conflicting terrain of the political.

Traditional investigative journalism once consisted of three phases: unearthing facts, crosschecking them, and backgrounding them into an understandable discourse. WikiLeaks does the first, claims to do the second, but omits the third entirely. This is symptomatic of a particular brand of the open access ideology in which content production itself is externalized to unknown entities “out there”. Were the crowds perhaps wise enough this time to bail after their first experiences with the “complex” personality of the leader? Wikipedia shows that it is possible to work with thousands (if not millions) of volunteers, but that it also takes time, including necessary conflicts, to develop a “culture of collaboration” based on trust and mutual understanding. This process includes decision-making structures specific to working online, with clear divisions of labour between those who make simple edits, expert editors related to specific sites and entries, and officials that are often only affiliated with national chapters.

From detailed news stories we know that the collaboration between Wikileaks and The Guardian (but also The New York Times) didn’t quite work out smoothly either. Apart from a clash of the main players’ personalities, incompatible value systems emerged between the hacker ethics of Assange and the journalistic common sense of mainstream news organisations (see Davies 2010/ Ellison 2011) (* 1). The crisis in investigative journalism is neither understood nor recognised. How productive entities are to sustain themselves materially is left in the dark: it is simply presumed that analysis and interpretation will be taken up by the traditional news media. However, crowd sourced analysis does not happen automatically. The saga of the Afghan War Logs and Cablegate demonstrates that WikiLeaks must approach and negotiate with well-established traditional media to secure sufficient credibility. At the same time, these media outlets proved themselves unable to fully process the material, and inevitably, they filtered the documents according to their own editorial policies.

Figurehead Politics

WikiLeaks is a typical SPO (Single Person Organisation) or UPO (Unique Personality Organisation). This means that the initiative taking, decision-making and execution is largely concentrated in the hands of a single individual. Like small and medium-sized businesses, the founder cannot be voted out, and, unlike many collectives, leadership does not rotate. This is not an uncommon feature within organisations,

irrespective of whether they operate in the realm of politics, culture or the “civil society” sector. SPOs are recognisable, exciting, inspiring and easy to feature in the media. Their sustainability, however, is largely dependent on the actions of their charismatic leader, and their functioning is difficult to reconcile with democratic values. This is also why they are difficult to replicate and do not scale up easily. How independent media projects structure their internal decision-making procedures is a matter of style and personal choice. The problem starts if the hierarchies are not clearly communicated and agreed upon internally.

Sovereign hacker Julian Assange is the identifying figurehead of WikiLeaks, and the organisation’s notoriety and reputation merges with Assange’s own. What WikiLeaks does and stands for becomes difficult to distinguish from Assange’s rather agitated private life and his somewhat unpolished political opinions. The memoirs published in early 2011 by Wikileaks’ second man and spokesperson in the years 2008 to mid 2010, the German hacker Daniel Domscheit-Berg, are a painstakingly detailed account of how amateur-like the ‘office-free organisation’ was up to the moment in September 2010 when Assange “fired” Domscheit-Berg, even though he was not his boss, legally speaking. The collectives of self-managed projects in the 1980s which ran on the basis of consensus and equality might have been outdated and annoying back then, but the chaos inside WikiLeaks in terms of its own lack of transparency (mind you, even for its own members!), unclear financial situation and utter lack of internal democracy is yet another extreme. It was that bad that Domscheit-Berg accused the paranoid, persecution-obsessed founder of running “his” WikiLeaks like a cult (“Do not challenge leadership in times of crisis.”) (* 4) (* 2). Domscheit-Berg disliked being spoken of as an “asset”. When Assange fired Domscheit-Berg he accused him of disloyalty, insubordination and destabilization: military terms used when spoken about traitors. Assange, who threatened to publish compromising material about Domscheit-Berg, wrote in a chat: “If you threaten this organization again, you will be attended to. You are a criminal. [...] Our duties are bigger than this idiocy.”(Domscheit-Berg 2011: 239) (* 2). And, last but not least: “I’m running out of options that don’t destroy people.” (Domscheit-Berg 2011: 239) (* 2). Instead of setting up his organisation OpenLeaks, Domscheit-Berg should have discussed the proposal to “fork” WikiLeaks—meaning copy-pasting the entire project and going separate ways, as suggested by another WikiLeaks core member, named “the Architect”, in Domscheit-Berg’s book—as a serious option.

The Post-Representational Network

WikiLeaks raises the question of what hackers have in common with secret services, since an elective affinity between the two is unmistakable. The love-hate relationship goes back to the very beginning of computing. One does not need to be a fan of German media theorist Friedrich Kittler’s conspiracy theories to acknowledge that the computer was born out of the military-industrial complex. From Alan Turing’s deciphering of the Nazi Enigma code to the first computers’ relation with the atomic bomb, from the cybernetics movement to the Pentagon’s involvement in the creation of the Internet, the correlation between computational information and the military-industrial complex is well established. Computer scientists and programmers have shaped the information revolution and the culture of openness; but at the same time they have also developed encryption (“crypto”), closing access to data for the non-initiated. What some see as “citizen journalism” others call “info war”.

WikiLeaks is also an organisation deeply shaped by 1980s hacker culture combined with the political values of techno-libertarianism that emerged in the 1990s. The fact that WikiLeaks was founded—and to a large extent is still run—by hard-core


geeks is essential to understanding its values and moves. Unfortunately, this comes together with a good dose of the less savoury aspects of hacker culture. Not that WikiLeaks lacks idealism or the desire to contribute to making the world a better place: on the contrary. But this brand of idealism (or, if you prefer, anarchism) is paired with a preference for conspiracies, an elitist attitude and a cult of secrecy (never mind condescension). This is not conducive to collaboration with like-minded people and groups who are relegated to the simple consumption of WikiLeaks' output. The missionary zeal to enlighten the idiotic masses and "expose" the lies of government, the military and corporations is reminiscent of the well-known (or infamous) media-culture paradigm from the 1950s.

Lack of commonality with congenial "Another World is Possible" movements drives WikiLeaks to seek public attention by way of increasingly spectacular and risky disclosures, thereby gathering a constituency of often wildly enthusiastic but generally passive supporters. Assange himself stated that WikiLeaks deliberately moved away from the "egocentric" blogosphere and assorted social media and nowadays collaborates only with professional journalists and human rights activists. Yet following the nature and quantity of WikiLeaks' exposures, from its inception up to the present day, is eerily reminiscent of watching a fireworks display, including a grand finale in the form of the so-called doomsday-machine: the yet-to-be-unleashed "insurance" document (known as ".aes256"). This raises serious doubts about the long-term sustainability of WikiLeaks itself, and possibly also of its model. WikiLeaks operates with a ridiculously small staff—probably no more than a dozen people form the core of its operation. While it proves the extent and savvy of WikiLeaks' tech support by its very existence, WikiLeaks' claim to several hundred volunteer analysts and experts is unverifiable and, to be frank, barely credible. This is clearly WikiLeaks' Achilles' heel, not only from a risk and/or sustainability standpoint, but politically as well – which is what matters to us here.

WikiLeaks has displayed a stunning lack of transparency in its internal organisation. It is not enough to say something along the lines of "WikiLeaks needs to be completely opaque in order to force others to be totally transparent". Do that and you beat the opposition, but in a way that makes you indistinguishable from it. Claiming the moral high ground after the job is done is not helpful—Tony Blair, too, excelled in that exercise. As WikiLeaks is neither a political collective nor an NGO in the legal sense, and nor, for that matter, a company or part of a social movement, we need to discuss what type of organisation we are dealing with. Is WikiLeaks a virtual project? After all, it does exist as a (hosted) website with a domain name, which is the bottom line. Does it have a goal beyond the personal ambition of its founder(s)? Is WikiLeaks reproducible? Will we see the rise of national or local chapters that keep the name? What rules of the game will they observe? Should we see it as a concept that travels from context to context and that, like a meme, transforms itself in time and space?


Maybe WikiLeaks will organise itself around its own version of the Internet Engineering Task Force's slogan "rough consensus and running code"? Projects like Wikipedia and Indymedia both resolved this issue in their own ways, but not without crises, conflicts and splits. Global NGOs like Greenpeace, Amnesty and Soros' Open Society foundations all have their experiences with less successful national chapters. Even bottom-up organizations without a central global brand collaborate internationally. This critique is not intended to force WikiLeaks into a traditional format; on the contrary, it is to explore whether WikiLeaks (and its future clones, associates, avatars and congenial family members) might act as a model for new forms of organisation and collaboration. As we speak WikiLeaks is anything but an "organized network". Perhaps WikiLeaks has its own ideas about the direction it wants to take. But where to? Up to now, however, we have seen very little by way of


an answer, leaving others to raise questions, for example, about the legality of WikiLeaks' financial arrangements (such as The Wall Street Journal's front page headline of August 23, 2010: "WikiLeaks keep funding secret").

We cannot flee the challenge of experimenting with post-representational networks. As ur-blogger Dave Winer wrote about the Apple developers "it's not that they're ill-intentioned, they're just ill-prepared. More than their users, they live in a Reality Distortion Field, and the people who make The Computer for the Rest of Us have no clue who the rest of us are and what we are doing. But that's okay, there's a solution. Do some research, ask some questions, and listen." (Winer 2011)  (* 5)

The New Whistleblower Paradigm

The widely shared critique of Julian Assange's self-inflicted celebrity cult invites the formulation of alternatives. Wouldn't it be better to run WikiLeaks as an anonymous collective or organized network, a concept discussed in the next chapter and that is now out-of-beta and starting to get real? Some wish to see many websites doing the same work as WikiLeaks. The group around Daniel Domscheit-Berg that launched OpenLeaks learned from previous experiences „that they did not scale very well“. *(5) Easily overlooked in the calls for WikiLeaks' proliferation is the amount of expert knowledge required to run a leak site where whistleblowers can submit their material in a secure way. We need an ABC tool-kit of secure submission software. When all the media and legal dust has settled, who knows whether Wikileaks retrospectively will turn out to be the prototype for an entirely new family of whistleblower software.

Perhaps paradoxically, there is much secrecy in this way of making-things-public. Is it realistic to promote the idea that ordinary internet users will be able to download the OpenLeaks software kit and get started? WikiLeaks is not a plug 'n play blog application like WordPress, and the word "wiki" in its name is misleading. Contrary to the collaboration philosophy of Wikipedia, WikiLeaks turned into a closed shop that was managed by a handful of people. The thousands of volunteers whom the organisation in 2009 and 2010 claimed to have were illusory and the step to work with The Guardian and other newspapers was in fact a necessity, due to the total absence of its own network of friendly editors and researchers. *(6)  (* 4) One is forced to acknowledge that the know-how necessary to run a facility like WikiLeaks is pretty arcane. Documents not only need to be received anonymously, but also be further anonymised before they are released online. They also must be edited before dispatched to the servers of international news organisations and other trusted parties such as NGOs and unions. It is questionable if such sensitive tasks can be "outsourced" to the crowds. In this respect, what WikiLeaks teaches us is how *not* to organise collective editorial flows.

WikiLeaks has built up much trust and confidence over the years and newcomers must go through that same, time-consuming process. The principle of leaks is not the hack (into state or corporate networks), but to facilitate insiders from large organisations to copy sensitive, confidential data and pass it on to the public domain while remaining anonymous. If you are aspiring to become a leak node, you'd better start acquainting yourself with processes like OPSEC, or operations security, a step-by-step plan which according to Wikipedia "identifies critical information to determine if friendly actions can be observed by adversary intelligence systems, determines if information obtained by adversaries could be interpreted to be useful to them, and then executes selected measures that eliminate or reduce adversary exploitation of friendly critical information." (Wikipedia b)  (* 7) The WikiLeaks slogan says: "courage is contagious".

According to experts, people who intend to run a WikiLeaks-type operation need nerves of steel. So before we call for one, ten, many WikiLeaks, let's be clear that those involved run risks. Whistleblower protection is paramount. Another issue is the protection of people mentioned in the leaks. The Afghan War Logs showed that leaks can also cause "collateral damage". Editing (and eliding) is crucial: not only OPSEC, but also OPETHICS. If publishing is not carried out in a way that is absolutely secure for all concerned, there is a definite risk that the "revolution in journalism" and politics unleashed by WikiLeaks will be stopped in its tracks.

Let us not think that taking a stand for or against WikiLeaks is what matters most. The WikiLeaks principle is here to stay, until it either scuttles itself or is destroyed by opposing forces. Our point is rather to (try to) assess and ascertain what WikiLeaks can, could and maybe even should do, and to help formulate how "we" could relate to and interact with it. Despite all its drawbacks and against all odds, WikiLeaks has rendered a sterling service to the cause of transparency, democracy and openness. The quantitative—and what looks soon to become the qualitative—turn of information overload is a fact of contemporary life. The glut of disclosable information can only be expected to grow—and exponentially so. To organize and interpret this Himalaya of data is a collective challenge, whether we give it the name WikiLeaks or not.

If we look at the big picture again, we are dealing with a shift from hacking to leaking here, both as IT tools democratise beyond the geeks and hackers and with a growing crisis in legitimacy due to financial scandals, the economic crisis and widening gaps in society. Disenfranchised individuals who recently were fired, feel they have nothing to lose and will overcome their fear and expose the hidden communications of authorities. Platforms come and go but what remains of the WikiLeaks saga, no matter how banal its poor inner life may be, is the outing of the very idea of leaking. Will leaks turn into cascades?

//Zur Person

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//Literaturnachweise

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//Fussnoten

- *1 *This is a rewritten and extended version of Ten Theses on Wikileaks, written with Patrice Riemens and originally published on the nettime mailing list and the INC blog on August 30, 2010, see: mail.kein.org/pipermail/nettime-l/2010-August/002337.html. The theses were updated in early December 2010 in the midst of Cablegate. The "twelve theses" got wide coverage and were translated in Dutch, German, French, Italian and Spanish.*
- *2 *See ns1758.ca/winch/winchest.html for a historical overview of the cost of harddrive storage space (reference thanks to Henry Warwick).*
- *3 *In the US 4GB USB sticks can be purchased from around 4.50 to 11 USD. 16 GB sticks cost around 20 USD, whereas 32 gigabytes USB sticks are priced between 40-50 USD (early 2011).*
- *4 *Remark made in the context of the group Anonymous, their actions against the Church of Scientology and the material that Wikileaks published from this sect. See: Domscheit-Berg 2011: 49.*
- *5 *Quoted from the opening video at the homepage of OpenLeaks, January 2010, www.OpenLeaks.org.*
- *6 *In Leigh/ Harding (2011: 61) we find a not-necessarily-correct description of how Assange (in early 2010) must have changed his mind about the collaborative "wiki" aspect of the project. "Assange had by now discovered, to his chagrin, that simply posting long lists of raw and random documents on to a website failed to change the world. He brooded about the collapse of his original 'crowd-sourcing' notion: "Our initial idea was, 'Look at all these people editing Wikipedia. Look at all the junk that they're working on... [...] surely those people will step forward, given fresh source material, and do something?' No, it's bullshit. In fact, people write about things because they want to display their values to their peers. Actually, they don't give a fuck about the material."*