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A decade of WikiLeaks: So what?

ABSTRACT

1. *In this article, I consider how WikiLeaks has gone through a series of metamorphoses: from a small, relatively unknown website devoted to giving whistleblowers space to release their material to one of the best-known activist organizations in the world. In addition, it has gone from being an organization that began by operating as an alternative to the mainstream media, to one that worked with the mainstream, and then to a group that devoted a fair degree of energy to attacking the media. I argue that during this tumultuous period of change, WikiLeaks needs to be understood in relation to its impact upon a number of fundamental relationships central to the study of media and journalism. I use WikiLeaks to consider the importance of studying sites and organizations as cultural artefacts, and to examine the idea that 'everything which has been collected on it, becomes attached to it-like shells on a rock by the seashore forming a whole incrustation'. Academic research itself is, of course, part of this incrustation.*

INTRODUCTION

17. Just over ten years ago, in August 2003, MySpace was launched. Inside of one
18. year, the site was attracting one million unique visitors per month; within two
19. years it was purchased by News Corporation for \$580 million; within three
20. years MySpace had beaten out Google to become the most visited website in
21. the world; and within five years the site was generating \$800 million a year
22. in revenue. The rest, as we know, is history. As of August 2014 MySpace has
23. an 'Alexa rank' (a ranking of global web traffic) of 1054, only one million

KEYWORDS

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active users and 2013 revenues of \$20 million. Facebook, created by Mark Zuckerberg only a few months after MySpace, has a global Alexa ranking of 2 (trailing only Google), approximately 1.3 billion monthly active users, and revenues in 2013 of just under \$8 billion.

So what does the respective failure and success of MySpace and Facebook have to do with WikiLeaks? Two things strike me as relevant. First, MySpace is a reminder that a decade is a long time, particularly when it comes to the study of non-legacy media such as Twitter, Facebook, MySpace and *Second Life*. Companies can burn bright and then fade, and, as is the nature of academic research, our focus is usually on the sparkle period, with the sad waning years left to occasional articles in the tech pages of newspapers and magazines. But there is a second, more important issue the MySpace case raises: that the site, despite all of its lost glory, is an important artefact for understanding the early years of social networking, the rise of Facebook itself, and the impact of (what we used to call) 'new media' upon the music industry. In other words, it is a stark reminder to consider the importance of studying sites and organizations as cultural artefacts, and to examine 'everything which has been collected on it, becomes attached to it – like shells on a rock by the seashore forming a whole incrustation' (Macherey cited in Bennett 1982: 3). Academic research itself is, of course, part of this incrustation.

In the case of WikiLeaks, even though the organization is still in the news, there is already a sense that the 'heat' has gone out of it as a story or object of study. However, I would like to take the argument presented above – organizations as research artefacts, and the incrustations around them – as a point of departure for looking at how we can use the emergence of WikiLeaks in 2006 to consider how the organization has been relevant to scholars within media studies (and I will include the study of Journalism within this admittedly broad category) over the past decade, and remains relevant today.

THE THREE STAGES OF WIKILEAKS

To begin, I would like to consider how WikiLeaks has gone through a series of metamorphoses: from a small, relatively unknown website devoted to giving whistleblowers space to release their material to one of the best-known activist organizations in the world. In addition, it has gone from being an organization that began by operating as an alternative to the mainstream media, to one that worked with the mainstream, and then to a group that devoted a fair degree of energy to attacking the media. I argue that during this tumultuous period of change, WikiLeaks needs to be understood in relation to its impact upon a number of fundamental relationships central to the study of media and journalism:

Groups such as WikiLeaks can be viewed through several lenses [...]

I felt it was important to consider both what these groups symbolize, why they emerge, and how they challenge and potentially re-shape fundamental relationships: between *citizens and the state* (impacted by providing access to sensitive intelligence previously hidden from view); between *citizens and the media* (impacted by exposure of the shortcomings of an uncritical commercial media system); and, between *media and governments* (impacted by challenging the mantle of 'watchdog' proudly trumpeted by major mainstream news outlets).

(Christensen 2015, original emphasis).

1. Interestingly, since the first material was posted to the WikiLeaks website in
 2. December of 2006 – a list of potential political assassinations in Somalia – the
 3. organization has shifted as an object of study. From this point of departure,
 4. and using Rucht's (2004) work on activist cultures as a springboard, I iden-
 5. tified what I considered to be three clear phases of the WikiLeaks identity:
 6. (1) Alternative, (2) Adaptation and (3), Abstention/Attack (Christensen 2015).
 7. These phases reveal a great deal about not only the organization, but how, why
 8. and when we as scholars begin to pay attention to a given group or event.

9. From the first leak in 2006, up to the major series of leaks in early 2010 (on
 10. Iraq and Afghanistan, and including the Collateral Murder video), WikiLeaks
 11. was somewhat of a media curiosity, and not a major subject of scholarly atten-
 12. tion. A cursory search on Google Scholar – which, of course, is not faultless
 13. and includes scholarly articles as well as theses and popular articles – showed
 14. 33 hits on the word 'WikiLeaks' in 2006, 67 in 2007, 124 in 2008 and 614 in
 15. 2009. During these early years, the vast majority of articles were popular, with
 16. the few academic pieces tending to come from Political Science or Law. Of
 17. course, during these early years, the paucity of writing and research on the
 18. organization could be put down to a simple lack of knowledge: most people,
 19. even veteran reporters and scholars, simply did not know of the existence of
 20. WikiLeaks.

21. Interestingly, during the 'pre-Manning' period of 2006–2009, WikiLeaks
 22. released a large number of significant leaks related to corporate and state
 23. malfeasance. In a two-year period, the organization revealed potential money-
 24. laundering by the Swiss bank Julius Baer (WikiLeaks 2008d); corporate phar-
 25. maceutical influence on the policy-making of the World Health Organization
 26. (WikiLeaks 2008a); the illegal dumping of toxic waste off of Ivory Coast
 27. (WikiLeaks 2009b); the membership lists of the far-right British National Party
 28. (WikiLeaks 2009a); and intimidation tactics by the US government during the
 29. Copenhagen Climate Change Conference (Carrington 2010). It is these early
 30. years that I define as WikiLeaks' 'alternative' period: the organization was just
 31. releasing material onto its website, with little interaction or collaboration with
 32. larger mainstream outlets. As such, it was an alternative source of informa-
 33. tion, but a source that was usually buried in a sea of other online material.
 34. But this 'Alternative' designation is not just because of WikiLeaks' output, but
 35. also the failure of mainstream news outlets – supposedly more skilled and
 36. adept at reporting – to obtain or reveal the same information. And even after
 37. WikiLeaks revealed these activities, there was relatively little media coverage,
 38. thus supporting years of critical political research pointing towards a pro-
 39. corporate, pro-status quo orientation in the mainstream press.

40. A monumental change in media and academic attention came in the
 41. next two years. Using the same Google Scholar search, hits for the word
 42. 'WikiLeaks' jumped from 614 in 2009 to 1450 in 2010, and up to 5720 in
 43. 2011. The reason was obvious: in 2010 the organization leaked the Iraq and
 44. Afghanistan War Documents and the Collateral Murder video (Christensen
 45. 2014), followed shortly thereafter by a slew of diplomatic cables (WikiLeaks
 46. 2010d, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c). The minimal media impact of the 'alternative'
 47. years was replaced by a high-impact collaboration with the mainstream media
 48. (to be discussed in the following section) during what we may call the 'adap-
 49. tation' period. It was during this period that WikiLeaks captured the attention
 50. of the US government, setting in motion the series of events that would even-
 51. tually lead to the arrest, conviction and imprisonment of WikiLeaks' most
 52. famous leaker, Chelsea Manning.

From an academic perspective there were myriad issues of relevance during this intense period, but those that captured the greatest attention were the collaboration between WikiLeaks and a limited number of outlets in the mainstream press, the use of leaked material by the press in general, and the question of whether or not WikiLeaks should be designated as a journalistic organization, and, thus, Julian Assange as a journalist (e.g., Lynch 2010, 2013; McNair 2012; Tambini 2013; Wahl-Jorgensen 2014). The curation of material by Assange – in particular his work in the Collateral Murder video (Christensen and Jónsdóttir 2014) – raised a valid argument regarding his status as a journalist. This was not an idle detail: such a designation could have offered Assange and WikiLeaks significant protection under US law. This goes back to the traditional question of defining what makes a journalist in the digital age, but, in the case of Assange, the question was not simply one connected to an organizational turf war, but a more fundamental issue of protection from persecution (e.g. Handley and Rutigliano 2012). Interestingly, in his analysis of how the mainstream media itself frames the issue of Assange and WikiLeaks as ‘journalists’, Coddington (2012: 378) found that ‘institutionality emerged as a key professional journalistic value [...] while source-based reporting routines and objectivity were largely bound within those contexts’. In other words, WikiLeaks was seen (by mainstream outlets) as lacking the institutional, organizational and professional values/structures required of a true journalistic organization (Christensen 2015).

The animosity towards WikiLeaks by the mainstream press led to an end of the formal working relationship between the whistleblowing organization and these newspapers in 2012. Unlike the period 2006–2009, however, WikiLeaks was now an internationally known commodity, and so going back to the days of being a relatively anonymous ‘alternative’ outlet was out of the question. Despite the rift, media outlets continued (and continue) to make use of WikiLeaks material, but WikiLeaks began to take a far more aggressive, adversarial position in relation to the mainstream media than they did before. WikiLeaks made use of social media, and Twitter in particular, to attack selected news outlets, governments and corporations. The arrest and trial of Chelsea Manning and a crippling economic embargo placed upon WikiLeaks by credit card companies and PayPal (instigated by the US government), together with Assange’s insistence that he was at risk for extradition to the United States should he travel to Sweden to face questioning over sexual assault accusations, led to a period defined as one of ‘abstention and attack’.

This latest phase in the WikiLeaks story – from 2012 to the present day – is often conflated with the Assange asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy and the sexual assault accusations in Sweden. Yet, during this period, some of the most dramatic events have taken place, most notably the Manning conviction, the economic embargo and the Snowden revelations. The symbolic importance of the sentence handed down to Manning cannot be overstated, and, as a media researcher, the implications of this conviction (and the stated intent of the Obama administration to vigorously pursue a conviction of Edward Snowden) send a clear message that the US government is sending a chilling message to those individuals and organizations considering revealing classified information. And the attempts to stifle such activities are not just found in the US, of course. The 2013 raid on *The Guardian* offices in London in the aftermath of the Snowden–Greenwald collaboration is also a marker that the UK government is willing to take harsh action against media outlets seen to be challenging state authority.

1. So, what do these three 'stages' of WikiLeaks development over the past
2. decade tell us? And how might media scholars use this decade as a tool for
3. considering future research? First, what is clear from the WikiLeaks case is that
4. academic interest in the organization was only piqued once the major Chelsea
5. Manning leaks had been revealed. Thus, much of the early work of the organi-
6. zation has, at best, been under-analysed and, at worst, ignored. And, this is not
7. an accusation; this is a mea culpa: my first piece of writing on WikiLeaks came
8. out in 2010. In this sense, academics are often guilty of doing the very thing of
9. which we accuse news organizations: focusing on the sensational and the spec-
10. tacular (war, riots, elections, crime) at the expense of the less sexy, the everyday
11. and the procedural. A good example of this is research on the first Gulf War
12. in 1991 and the subsequent US occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan a decade
13. later. As one would expect, a great deal was published on news coverage of the
14. actual invasions and occupations of Kuwait and Iraq, but it is worth considering
15. to what extent the period *between* the two occupations was the subject of media
16. research: the period of US sanctions and sporadic bombing (primarily during
17. the Clinton administration). Again, even a cursory search will show that there
18. is very little research on this period, despite the fact that the human toll of the
19. sanctions has been estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands.

20. Just as the different stages of US involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan over
21. a twenty-year period included different forms of influence and power, so the
22. various stages in the evolution of WikiLeaks do the same. When corporate
23. or state entities exert power in raw forms – such as war, violence or propa-
24. ganda – research is made much easier: the data are clearer, the evidence is
25. stronger and the conclusions sharper. In the case of WikiLeaks, 2009–2011
26. was their period of greatest impact and exposure. Yet, I would argue that their
27. early years and their most recent years can tell us a great deal about their place
28. in the media-scape, and the power of corporations and the state to react to
29. their existence. Prior to their breakthrough, the US government had a limited
30. interest in WikiLeaks, and yet the material in their leaks generated few articles
31. in the mainstream media. Corporate malfeasance, even at a level that could
32. threaten the lives of millions through medicine price fixing or climate change
33. inaction, was not an issue in which mainstream organizations were interested.
34. And, in the most recent years for WikiLeaks, the use of the law (or threat of
35. use) as a blunt instrument against the organization and other whistleblow-
36. ers such as Edward Snowden should be of primary concern for scholars. The
37. chilling effect of a government crackdown on whistleblowers, sources and
38. journalists will have profound implications for freedom of the press.

39. A final observation about the three phases of WikiLeaks is actually a self-
40. reflection on the definitions I have used. Just as there is a tendency to place
41. a great deal of focus upon the unusual and the spectacular, it is also part of
42. the praxis of academic work to categorize, compartmentalize and label. This
43. rationalizes academic labour, once again making data collection and analy-
44. sis easier. This is, in part, what I have done in the previous section where I
45. 'understood' the evolution of WikiLeaks by dividing their eight years of exist-
46. ence into three eras. These categorizations can be very useful and informa-
47. tive, but we also need to be wary of promoting unproductive binary thinking
48. (alternative versus mainstream) and excessive compartmentalization. In the
49. next section, I would like to consider some of the ways in which WikiLeaks
50. has been discussed over the past decade, and to consider how the organiza-
51. tion forces us to reconsider some of our more rigid, and occasionally binary,
52. understandings.

GRAND IDEAS

As a doctoral student in the mid- to late 1990s, I was exposed to a great deal of what we might call 'The Death Of ...' literature. Whether it was the 'death of the nation state', the 'death of newspaper' or the 'death of the mass audience', a wide variety of theses were forwarded positing a causal relationship between technological change and heightened information flows and the restructuring of media organization and consumption. In addition, we read about how new technologies in general, and the Internet in particular, would empower citizens: bypassing established media power structures, this given voice to the previously voiceless. In other words, a decade ago, technology was very much in what Mosco (2004) described as the 'digital sublime': a magical time where the possibilities of new technologies were seen as endless. Of course this period did not last, and as time passed discussions on the powerful potential (both positive and negative) of new technologies became more nuanced and contextualized. Yet, as we have seen over the past decade, there remain strands of what we might call 'grand ideas' and even 'myths' in relation to technology and society.

The residual power of these theses was perhaps best illustrated during the early stages of what has been loosely described as 'the Arab Spring' when journalists and scholars reverted to early techno-centric arguments about the causal relationship between technology and social change (e.g., Christensen 2011b, 2012b), using terms such as 'Twitter Revolution' and 'Facebook Revolution'. This brings us to WikiLeaks, and I would argue that, just as we saw during the protests in Tahrir Square, we have witnessed the resurrection of a number of techno-centric arguments in relation to the whistleblowing organization. Two of them have been fairly standard, and I would like to discuss them in greater detail: first, that WikiLeaks is a 'borderless' organization, and second, that the organization was a threat to the position of established journalism.

The first of these arguments – that WikiLeaks is a global, 'borderless' organization – harkens back to both the 'death of the nation state' thesis present in literature on globalization over a decade ago and the concept of global flows. Here, in the face of advanced technologies and encryption, governments are almost powerless to control the rivers of information and capital crossing their national borders. And it is not only the information that becomes unencumbered by borders, but also organizations. WikiLeaks was also pitched as a fluid, stateless organization, with information coming from the United States via Chelsea Manning, going to servers in Sweden, and then being unencrypted, edited and distributed via Iceland.

This notion of WikiLeaks' organizational and informational rootlessness is, however, problematic, and, if anything, WikiLeaks is a reaffirmation of the power of the nation state. While it is true that WikiLeaks since its formation in 2006 has maintained a certain flexibility in terms of location, what is also crystal clear is that, rather than having a 'borderless' view of the world, the organization has been extremely meticulous in its selection of bases from which to work. Countries such as Sweden, Belgium and Iceland were used because they afforded the organization maximum legal protection under their respective whistleblower and freedom of speech laws. In addition, one should consider the myriad ways in which the power of the nation state has asserted or attempted to exert itself in relation to the organization. At the time of the writing of this article, Chelsea Manning is serving a 30-year sentence in a US military prison while WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange has sought

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1. asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy in London. In addition, WikiLeaks volun-
2. teers Jacob Appelbaum and Birgitta Jónsdóttir found themselves subjects of
3. US Department of Justice requests for their private social media messages and
4. information (Christensen and Jónsdóttir 2014). My argument is that much of
5. our writing and discourse to date on borderless-ness in relation to technology
6. has tended to focus more on the flow of information and less on the material/
7. physical implications for those who use the technology. I would also note that
8. while policy is often discussed in relation to nation state power and the flow
9. of information, the use of physical and psychological violence in the service of
10. censorship is also prevalent and worthy of considerable attention from media
11. scholars.

12. This brings me to the second point raised in relation to WikiLeaks since
13. 2006, namely, the extent to which the organization has acted as a foil or
14. competitor to so-called 'legacy media', particularly news organizations. This is
15. also an off-shoot of the older 'death of journalism' and 'death of newspapers'
16. theses that gained prominence a decade ago with the rise of online publica-
17. tions, bloggers and citizen journalists. It is not my intention here to discuss the
18. standard 'Who is a Journalist?' question, but rather to consider how organiza-
19. tions such as WikiLeaks can both challenge mainstream news organizations
20. and at the same time contribute to those organizations' cultural and economic
21. capital. The relationship between WikiLeaks and the mainstream press after
22. 2006 proved to be not only complex and volatile but also lucrative. As I have
23. noted elsewhere, and particularly during the heady post-Manning leak years
24. between 2009 and 2011, WikiLeaks was both an important part of new media
25. ecology and a symptom of deep problems within US journalism.

26. The latter of these issues (WikiLeaks as symbol of malaise) brings us back
27. to some of our most seminal academic writings on the political economy of
28. US journalism in which the mainstream media are not defined by their adver-
29. sarial position vis-à-vis political and economic power, but rather by their posi-
30. tions *within* those power structures. As Emily Bell (2010: 5) put it in relation to
31. WikiLeaks, 'this is the first real battleground between the political establish-
32. ment and the open web [...] [which] forces journalists and news organisations
33. to demonstrate to what extent they are now part of an establishment it is their
34. duty to report'. Over the past five years, the material leaked by WikiLeaks has
35. contributed to a renewed debate on the role of mainstream media systems
36. within contemporary democracies (Brevini et al. 2013). As the legal scholar
37. ● Yochai Benkler (2012: 330) put it, WikiLeaks forces us to consider:

38.
39. the challenges that a radically decentralized global networked public
40. sphere poses for those systems of control that developed in the second
41. half of the twentieth century to tame the fourth estate, to make the
42. press not only 'free', but also 'responsible'. Doing so allows us to
43. understand that the threat represented by Wikileaks was not any
44. single cable, but the fraying of the relatively loyal and safe relationship
45. between the United States Government and its watchdog. Nothing
46. captures that threat more ironically than the spectacle of Judith Miller,
47. the disgraced *New York Times* reporter who yoked that newspaper's
48. credibility to the Bush Administration's propaganda campaign regard-
49. ing Iraq's weapons of mass destruction in the run-up to the Iraq War,
50. using Fox News as a platform to criticize Julian Assange for neglecting
51. the journalist's duty of checking his sources and instead providing raw
52. cables to the public.

As we use WikiLeaks to consider 'where we have been' and 'where we are going' in academic research, it is noteworthy that a great deal of important research on the implications of the WikiLeaks case in recent years has come from legal scholars (e.g. Cannon 2013; Davidson 2011; Fenster 2012; Peters 2011; Rothe and Steinmetz 2013; Wells 2012), an area often overlooked in favour of more 'related' disciplines such as sociology, political science and anthropology. This legal scholarship has added a great deal to our understanding of how organizations such as WikiLeaks provide us with cases that can be precedent-setting. In his analysis, Benkler uses the term 'the networked Fourth Estate' to describe how a new news and information system has evolved that will work in conjunction with our pre-existing media systems. This new system, Benkler writes, will be 'both constructive and destructive', but one that is necessary given that, 'the traditional, managerial-professional sources of responsibility in a free press function imperfectly under present market conditions' (2012: 396).

What Benkler (2012) has done in defining the future interrelationship between the 'networked fourth estate' and traditional media as both *constructive* and *destructive* is to highlight an important aspect of 'death of' theses in relation to WikiLeaks and journalism/news media. Much of the last decade of popular and scholarly debate on 'new media' began with discussions on how these media would challenge, replace, outdate or even kill traditional outlets; then, of course, the discourse shifted to questions of traditional outlets restructuring, rethinking, adapting and just surviving. Benkler's notion of WikiLeaks (and organizations like WikiLeaks) as working 'in conjunction' with mainstream media, on the other hand, is to step away from binary 'cause-effect' and/or 'alternative-mainstream' paradigms and instead consider interrelationships and their mutual benefit and/or harm.

In a couple of pieces I wrote just after the WikiLeaks release of the Afghanistan and Iraq war documents (Christensen 2010, 2011c), I argued that the WikiLeaks collaboration with mainstream outlets such as *Der Spiegel*, the *New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *El Pais* was pure pragmatism: WikiLeaks wanted maximum exposure for their material, and they wanted it packaged in a professional manner, and the news outlets, for obvious reasons, wanted the material and were thus willing to agree to WikiLeaks' demands regarding release (that the material had to be published on the same day). It is also important to remember that WikiLeaks collaborated almost exclusively with large western mainstream outlets, and not small alternative media organizations. The notion of WikiLeaks promoting a chaotic information free-for-all was far from the truth, illustrated by the following rationale given by Assange for not simply releasing the leaked war material all at once:

You'd think the bigger and more important the document is, the more likely it will be reported on but that's absolutely not true. It's about supply and demand. Zero supply equals high demand, it has value. As soon as we release the material, the supply goes to infinity, so the perceived value goes to zero.

In other words, Assange was very much thinking and acting as an information capitalist. While the relationship between WikiLeaks and these outlets would ultimately turn sour, the original collaboration was a clear example of a 'win-win' situation: exposure of potentially explosive material on the abuse of power in exchange for commercial and professional gain. While the first half

1. of that equation is, of course, crucial, it is equally important to consider the
2. latter. As I put it:

3.
4. It is clear that WikiLeaks have performed a crucial democratic func-
5. tion via their revelations, and it is also clear that this function was made
6. possible – with the release of the Afghanistan and Iraq war documents –
7. via a calculated collaboration with mainstream media [and] through
8. this collaboration WikiLeaks sent a clear message to the broader public:
9. whether we like it or not, large news outlets are still important in
10. contemporary society. It is equally important to note that this collabora-
11. tion was done with the clear side-effects of boosting the sales figures,
12. advertising revenues and sociocultural capital of these already powerful,
13. Western media organizations.

14.
15. In sum, what WikiLeaks reminded us is that laws, structure and reputation
16. matter a great deal, and that binary frameworks can constrain our under-
17. standing of the bigger picture.

18. **CONCLUSIONS**

19. In all of my pieces to date on WikiLeaks, and regardless of intended audi-
20. ence, my interest has been in the relationship between the group and differ-
21. ent power structures – politics, journalism or even academia – rather than
22. the content of the leaks themselves. The reason for this is related to the
23. argument I presented at the start of this article: that, from their very point
24. of origin, cultural artefacts accumulate incrustations around them, and that
25. how people or organizations react to or ‘decode’ an artefact can tell us a
26. great deal about the sociocultural relevance of that item or organization,
27. sometimes more so than the presumed ‘encoded’ meaning. The reaction
28. of journalists, politicians, the military, activists and the courts to WikiLeaks
29. over the past decade has been illuminating. This is not an organization most
30. scholars are interested in studying, and it was not my intention in this piece
31. to suggest that they should. My hope, however, is that the relatively short
32. life of WikiLeaks is an illuminating example of how our scholarly and popu-
33. lar understandings of a given organization can, and perhaps should, be in
34. constant question.

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