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The Role & Impact of WikiLeaks on 21st Century Journalism

In recent decades, the public's access to news coverage on corporate and government corruption has become obscured. A large share of mainstream news outlets are owned by conglomerations of companies. These conglomerations hold interests in government contracts and in corporate entities. If there is corruption in the government or wrongdoing by companies that impacts the interests of a media conglomeration its news organizations may be pressured to put a positive spin on the story or to simply not cover the story at all. But the public has a right to know. Corruption in government creates waste of taxpayer's dollars or covers up other various scandals detrimental to the general public. Corruption by companies can limit opportunities, or can illegally promote all kinds of human and societal abuses. A fundamental purpose of the press is to hold authorities accountable to the Constitution and the laws of our nation. But when the news organizations are owned by conglomerations with a vested interest in the subject of such violations, it is unlikely their reporters will be allowed to investigate and report on those affairs. In essence, the corporate elites have gotten control of the news media.

The conglomerate corporate control of the media is why Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, plays an essential role in journalism today. He has restored something we have by and large lost in the corporate controlled news media culture: the willingness to serve the public's interest in holding authorities accountable.

Julian Assange was born and raised by a family of "borderline hippies" in Queensland, Australia. As a teenager, using the online moniker "Mendax," he hacked into the computers systems of Australian National University and Telecom which earned him a fine of \$2100. Later, he collaborated on a book entitled *Underground* about computer hackers in Australia (Strutton).

Assange created Wikileaks which first online in 2007, allowing any individual to anonymously publish previously classified, hidden or sensitive documents and make them publicly available. (Voice of America) The site is operated by Sunshine Press and it “claims to be "funded by human rights campaigners, investigative journalists, technologists and the general public" (Fildes).

WikiLeaks accepts restricted or censored material of political, ethical, diplomatic or historical significance. Through an electronic “drop-box” which WikiLeaks describes as a “novel method of submission based on a suite of security technologies designed to provide anonymity” with “military-grade encryption protection”, people can submit documents.

WikiLeaks’ first dispatch of documents, “Afghan War Diary” disclosed U. S. military documents covering the Afghan War, took place on July 25, 2010 (Gabauer). “WikiLeaks’ disclosures also included hacked e-mails sent by 2008 U.S. Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin, extensive documents from the upper ranks of Scientology, details on the United States’ Guantanamo Bay procedures, and the inappropriate disposal of toxic materials in Africa” (Axon)

On April 5, 2010 WikiLeaks disclosed aerial footage of a July 12, 2007 attack on civilians in Baghdad resulting in “nine people in the street were dead, including a photographer and his assistant for the news agency Reuters. Two Iraqi children were injured, while U.S. forces suffered no casualties” (Cohen). Private Bradley Manning, a 22 year old intelligence analyst with the United States Army in Baghdad, was charged with disclosing this video (after allegedly speaking to a journalist) (Shipton).

The Pentagon did not disclose the video or details of the incident to the public when took place in 2007. A review of the video and the Pentagon investigation may indicate that the Apaches mistook cameras for weapons. A report by the Department of the Army justifies the attack by stating, “The cameramen made no effort to visibly display their status as press or media representatives... and their furtive attempts to photograph the Coalition Ground Forces made them appear as hostile combatants to the Apaches that engaged them” (Department of the Army).

It is difficult to understand how cameramen are not supposed to be taking photos or how doing so was a hostile act. It is also difficult to understand how the cameramen could be expected to display their press badges when they came under fire by Apache helicopters. Regardless of whether the Apaches made an honest mistake under the fog of war or not, the public was not made aware of details of the attack on the Reuters journalists until WikiLeaks revealed it.

In the spirit of the Pentagon Papers, Assange is getting attacked on legal grounds. The Pentagon Papers “exposed the official lies behind the Gulf of Tonkin "incident" that provided the rationale for the Vietnam War.” (Palermo) Nixon argued that if the papers were published, other governments would distrust the U.S. That argument is being made about WikiLeaks today. The Supreme Court argued that because the Pentagon Papers were stolen, they belonged to the U.S. government, but refused to block its publication. The Obama administration is making a similar accusation. (Daniloff).

When someone is deemed the enemy of the state, there is no telling what lengths the government may take. If the U.S. and other governments cannot take Assange down on charges of espionage or threatening national security, there are other tactics that may come into play. Perhaps they can take Assange down by making accusations of sexual crimes, shutting down his website and shutting off his finances. In the days following Assange’s “Cablegate” disclosure in which numerous diplomatic cables were disclosed, the BCC reported that Paypal and Amazon shut down payment processing service to WikiLeaks. Mastercard soon followed suit. And the company providing server space for the WikiLeaks web site shut down the site after it got hit with too many requests and cyber attacks. WikiLeaks created a new website with a Swiss server company, which was later shut down on the claim that Assange had used false information about his address in the application (Digital Trends). The site has since created dozens of mirror web sites on servers around the world.

On August 20, 2010, a Stockholm prosecutor issued the arrest warrant on Assange accusing of being a suspect in rape and molestation in two separate cases. The next day, Swedish authorities dropped the rape charges against Assange stating that the accusation lacked substance. As the rape

charge was dropped, Assange remained a suspect of a molestation charge. Under Swedish law, molestation covers a range of offenses including inappropriate physical contact with another adult. According to Karin Rosander, a spokeswoman for the Swedish Prosecution Authority, molestation is a less serious charge that would not lead to a warrant (Ritter). Assange's British lawyer, Mark Stephens, said the charges stem from a "dispute over consensual but unprotected sex" (Barr).

Two days after the rape charges warrant issuance, a day after it was dropped, Assange claimed that the CIA may be behind the rape allegations. According to Fox News, "Kristinn Hrafnsson, a WikiLeaks spokesman in Iceland, called the sequence of events related to the arrest warrant too "remarkable" to rule out ulterior motives" (Ristiniemi). Assange told Al Jazeera "he had been forewarned by Australian intelligence on August 11 to expect a campaign against him, though it was unclear who was behind it. 'It is clearly a smear campaign ... the only question is who was involved.'" (Al Jazeera). According to the website Rawstory.com, "one of the women that is accusing WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange of sex crimes appears to have worked with a group that has connections to the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)" (Edwards). The charges according to The Raw Story stem from the claim that Assange did not use condoms during sex with two Swedish women.

The difficulty with this report is that Washington, D.C. based The Raw Story is a left-leaning web site which exists to "unearth and spotlight stories underplayed by the popular press, in particular those which highlight betterment and open people's eyes to injustice throughout the world." Without a mainstream news organization picking up on this angle to the story, it is difficult to know the credibility of Assange's counter-accusation that the sex charges are a smear campaign. If the CIA can manipulate the facts and the Swedish government to bring trumped up sex charges on Assange, they may be able to manipulate the corporate media to not investigate the credibility of the accusation. After all, the mainstream media was duped into believing that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction at his disposal in the lead up to the U.S. led invasion of Iraq. We think we know what is a credible source of news. But that doesn't explain how the National Enquirer managed to get the scoop on Jonathan Edwards'

affair. How can we be sure that Assange's accuser is not merely following orders as a CIA agent? Who will provide us with a credible investigation and if they try will governments attempt to shut them down as well?

Even if the United States or Sweden manages to extradite Assange on sex charges or espionage accusations, the work of WikiLeaks likely will continue because Assange said, "material from the diplomatic cables and other documents had been sent in encrypted form "to over 100,000 people." "If something happens to us, the key parts will be released automatically," [Assange] said. But [he] didn't say whether an arrest would trigger such a mass release" (Barr). After Assange's arrest, WikiLeaks volunteers released a tweet stating that Assange's arrest would not prevent them from continuing to disseminate the rest of the "Cablegate" documents or future document releases.

Some people and news media organizations are referring to Assange as a 'whistle blower.'

The Government Accountability Project describes a whistleblower as:

"An employee who discloses information that s/he reasonably believes is evidence of illegality, gross waste or fraud, mismanagement, abuse of power, general wrongdoing, or a substantial and specific danger to public health and safety. Typically, whistleblowers speak out to parties that can influence and rectify the situation. These parties include the media, organizational managers, hotlines, or Congressional members/staff, to name a few." (Government Accountability Project)

Generally, whistle blowers have access to information on the wrongdoing because they work for the organization they are reporting the wrongdoing. Whether or not those who are making disclosures to WikiLeaks can be protected from legal action depends on the circumstances surrounding their access to the information being disclosed, the kind of organization they are disclosing the information on and their role within the organization. U.S. Courts generally protect whistleblowers from retaliation for their disclosures (U. S. Dept of Labor). However, the Supreme Court ruling *Garcetti v. Ceballos, 2006* found that public employees do not have the same protections. So the government can go after those who leak such information, if they can find them. Because WikiLeaks accepts anonymous submissions of information, often Assange does not even know who sent the leak. It will be up to the governments to figure out who disclosed the leak to WikiLeaks. For example, the U.S. Army arrested Specialist Bradley

Manning on charges that he released classified information in connection with the video which shows the Apache gunship mistakenly shooting civilians (Grier).

Mashable.com, a web site of news in social and digital media, technology and web culture, puts WikiLeaks at the top of their list of “5 Innovative Websites That Could Reshape the News” (Axon). And reshaping journalism is just what WikiLeaks is doing. Assange has made conflicting statements in defining his role. He “has publicly eschewed the role of impartial journalist” (Levey) and has even made comments critical of mainstream journalists for not doing enough. However, he told Time magazine, “I am a journalist and publisher and inventor. In the case of WikiLeaks, I have tried to create a system which solves the problem of censorship of the press and censorship of whistleblowers across the whole world” (Harrell). However, WikiLeaks is not a journalist because Assange is not writing stories based on the information he gets, he merely dumps the information out to news organizations. Neither is WikiLeaks a whistleblower because whistle-blowers are those who are sharing the leaked documents.

Assange himself has such a hard time of defining his role because WikiLeaks has created a new level of interaction in the world of journalism. It is a role that is germinated out of the modern nature of journalism in which news organizations are owned by corporate entities which have vested interests in protecting the secrets of governments, banking institutions and other institutions in our society. In his statement to Time magazine, Assange is critical of the limitations placed on journalists by news organizations owned by corporate conglomerations.

A large share of the news media in the world is owned by a handful of corporate conglomerations.. NBC for example, as well as CNBC, MSNBC, is owned by General Electric. General Electric also owns a consumer electronics division. So it is unlikely that NBC will report on how the policy of outsourcing electronics manufacturing to China hurts American jobs. General Electric has a division that makes turbines for nuclear power plants, an incentive to not cover the risks of nuclear power. They have a division that builds military hardware; which is a built incentive to report in such a way that justifies war in the minds of their viewers. Disney, which owns ABC, also owns a crude oil and holdings company, giving them very

little incentive to report on peak oil issues. CBS is owned by a company which also owns another company that disposes of nuclear and other hazardous wastes, and operates four government owned power plants in the U.S. Rupert Murdoch who was a big supporter of the invasion of Iraq, owns FOX News which reaches 50% of U.S. households. Murdoch also dominates the media in UK, AUS, NZ, US, with 175 titles, 40 million papers a week. During the Bush administration, Murdoch's newspapers pushed the opinion that Bush was pursuing the proper path. Given the corporate interests, government interests and political bias among the majority of news sources in the U.S. and around the world, it is no surprise that journalists can be stymied in their attempt to report the truth. What we end up with, is a press culture which fails to inform the public about what is really going on in government and in corporations.

The press has the freedom and an historic & Constitutional role of reporting authoritarian attempts by our government to deny representation or to act as if it is a monarchy or aristocracy and to hold corporations accountable to their actions. According to the First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, there is a "direct link between freedom of speech and vibrant democracy. Free speech is an indispensable tool of self-governance in a democratic society" (Smolla). In 1690 the 1st U.S. newspaper *Publick Occurances, Both Foreign & Domestic* was published in Boston. Its first issue contained gossip about the King of France and an account of the French & Indian War. The British authorities did not like this, so they shut the press down (Sullivan). Today, the press is not shut down, but influenced on how/if they cover a story depending on profit and political priorities. Breaking through the stronghold of the elites on the press is a difficult one. However, Wikileaks upends the corporate grip on news organizations and is changing the shape of modern journalism.

This is not a new phenomenon. What is new this time around is the ease at which Assange can disseminate the documents by posting them on the internet for nearly everyone to view. This sounds like the kind of transparency Assange purports to want to achieve. Evan Hansen from Wired magazine writes, "WikiLeaks' role is not the same as the press's, since it does not always endeavor to vet information prior to publication. But it

operates within what one might call the media ecosystem, feeding publications with original documents that are found nowhere else and insulating them against pressures from governments seeking to suppress information” (Hansen).

Assange goes beyond anything Drudge ever achieved because Drudge picks and chooses with a political bias what will be published from anonymous sources. Assange just puts it all out there for the citizens of the world to decide what is right and what is unjust. The backlash against WikiLeaks is so strong because it exposes corruption. And apparently there is a whole lot of corruption taking place around the world, even in democracies which generally regard transparency of government to be a good thing. In this regard, WikiLeaks’ can best be described as a muckraker. Those exposed by WikiLeaks have been able to rely on the ties between corporate conglomerations and journalism to prevent their corruption from being exposed. WikiLeaks removes that veil, and possibly threatens the companies which own the news media consumed by most Americans.

"You really see the potential for a more informed public," said former defense analyst Daniel Ellsberg, who nearly 40 years ago leaked a classified history of the Vietnam War known as the Pentagon Papers” (Levey). WikiLeaks can be a treasure trove of leads for journalists helping to “fuel major news stories and public debates about U.S. foreign policy and other global issues” (Levey).

In the brave new internet world where anyone can share information and just about anyone can receive it, corruption can no longer hide behind the mortgaged fourth estate. The question is, especially within the context of corporate owned media, how will the leaks be covered in the news media? Will we be distracted by Assange’s accusers? Or will the news media step out of their corporate mold and report on the truth. That is something we have yet to see, for it will take time to see whether news publishers follow up the leaks to do a thorough investigation. We can only hope they do these investigations and that they find a way to step outside of the interests of corporate conglomerated media so that the public can know what they need to know to hold governments and corporations accountable. Liberty, democracy and freedom depend on it.

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