

WIKILEAKS AND THE NEW NEWS

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Which media magnate has had the biggest impact on politics in the last couple of years? Rupert Murdoch, Julian Assange or Mark Zuckerberg? And which of that trio has created the most participatory media for the benefit of citizens?

Having just written a book about WikiLeaks¹ I think, you will not be surprised to hear, that, at least during one phase, it has been the most challenging media innovation of the digital era.

Yet if we measure the real world impact, it is probably social networks like Facebook that have played the most extensive part in catalysing significant social and political change in places like the Arab world.

However, while these emergent forms of media provide new channels and platforms for political communications, it is mainstream media – and Rupert Murdoch owns a lot of that – that has networked itself into a position where, economics allowing, it is getting increasingly effective at reinventing the idea of the Fourth Estate. Instead of fortresses of privileged, gate-keeping professionals we are seeing much more innovative professional journalism created in partnership with new organisations like WikiLeaks – and new networks like Facebook. With that comes greater public participation of different kinds.

The task for media researchers interested in public participation will be to map those developing, hybrid media practices and examine their consequences in the political economy. That is why in my book I try to move on from debates about whether WikiLeaks is journalism or not and on to the much more interesting question of what it signifies for the future of news media.

A lot of WikiLeaks is familiar. Leaks, political bias and charismatic editorial leaders have always been part of traditional and alternative journalism. What was new about WikiLeaks was its ability to avoid the restrictions put upon national mainstream media. Despite the onslaught against it from politicians and envious press rivals it managed to publish the biggest leak of confidential information ever.

It may not survive – partly because of its dependence on one person and one major leak – but the conditions that made it so potent and disruptive are still there. The internet still affords the protection of server space spread across the globe and beyond the control of any one government. The lack of a national base for WikiLeaks means it is almost free from the legal, regulatory and commercial sanctions that mainstream media acts within. The abundance of information flowing through corporate and governmental systems will be made more secure but their volume will not decrease so the potential for future leaks is growing. The public scepticism of the communications created by authorities is also increasingly driven by social trends such as increasing education and literacy, suggesting that the appetite for disruptive revelatory disclosure will also grow.

Governments and corporations around the world are trying hard to reassert their control over the internet and it does seem inevitable that it is not going

to get easier for outside or alternative journalism that challenges the consensus.

But in the networked era new hybrid media forms are constantly evolving. It may be that they will be transient and that could be their strength. They will be able to exploit the universality of the internet to avoid institutional capture and censure. However, the most effective will also exploit the networks of mainstream and social media rather than existing in isolation.

This was the big lesson for Julian Assange over the Iraq and Afghan War Logs and the Embassy Cables – it was only when he entered into that tense and difficult relationship with the mainstream media that he affected to despise,² that WikiLeaks' revelation began to have any impact on decision-makers and the general public.

We can see that happening as commercial news media organisations such as Al Jazeera begin to adopt both the whistle-blowing technologies of WikiLeaks and the social networking channels of Facebook, Twitter and the rest. This is partly about a kind of exploitative relationship that seeks the best material (often for free) from citizen or open sources. But it also provides a professionally-managed platform for that material that otherwise might never find a significant audience. Al Jazeera's The Stream is an online platform that combines video, text, stills and audio with conventional programming as well as social networking and external media sources.

There is a lot of churnalism and complacent, duplicating journalism still being produced by mainstream media.³ At their best though, journalists have the editing, filtering and packaging skills to tell stories in a way that gets attention and adds value. In a world of information overload and distortion, that is ever more important. Research shows⁴ they are already effective at becoming networked to supplement their work and to improve its dissemination.

At the same time, for that information to be effective in the real world it has to connect in an interactive way with the networks of organisation, debate and criticism that citizens have created for themselves. The conversation about the way our lives is led is increasingly happening on social forums such as Twitter or websites such as Mumsnet in the UK. As developing economies build their own communications infrastructures distinctive networks are evolving there, too. Mainstream media journalists are increasingly going to have to work with the individual citizens and organisations that are most effective in these spaces.

WikiLeaks was not an open, participatory organisation. Ideologically it is not interested in shared production. Perhaps a whistleblower website has to be secretive by its very nature. But the information that these kinds of sites can reveal allows other networks the data for discussion. The challenge for mainstream media is to ask itself: in the networked era can we provide that kind of journalism? And if not, how do we work with these new news producers and the public to add value?



Endnotes

1. Beckett, C and Ball, J. 2012. *WikiLeaks: News In The Networked Era*. Cambridge; Polity Press
2. Leigh, D and Harding, L. 2011. *Wikileaks: Inside Julian Assange's War On Secrecy*. Guardian Books
3. Davies, N. 2008. *Flat Earth News: An Award-Winning Reporter Exposes Falsehood, Distortion and Propaganda in the Global Media*. London; Chatto and Windus
4. Beckett, C. 2010. The Value of Networked Journalism. Polis Report. <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2010/06/06/2932/>