



WikiLeaks and the Shifting Terrain of Knowledge Authority

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Introduction: WikiLeaks, Knowledge, and Authority

Since 2010, there has been a deluge of reporting and commentary in the traditional press and online about the consequences and implications of WikiLeaks and its activities for journalism, diplomacy, democracy, law, and trust. Reactions to its releases of huge caches of classified documents and diplomatic correspondence throughout 2010 ranged from outrage and borderline hysteria (U.S. politicians Sarah Palin and Senator Joseph Lieberman called for the assassination of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange) to bemused skepticism (“It would be an exaggeration to say that diplomacy will never be the same again”; “Unpluggable,” 2010, p. 34). Somewhere in between, some officials and journalists took a more nuanced view, at least some of the time. While calling for aggressive criminal prosecution of Assange and WikiLeaks, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also praised the high level of professionalism, acute observation, and stylish writing on view in the leaked State Department cables. In a November 2010 Pentagon press briefing, former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates observed, “Is this embarrassing? Yes. Is it awkward? Yes. Consequences for U.S. foreign policy? I think fairly modest” (Bumiller, 2010, para. 7). In January 2011, Bill Keller, executive editor of *The New York Times*, defended its publication of classified documents obtained from WikiLeaks:

The idea that mere publication of such a wholesale collection of secrets will make other countries less willing to do business with our diplomats seems to me questionable. . . . David Sanger, our chief Washington correspondent, told me, “At least so far, the evidence that foreign leaders are no longer talking to American diplomats is scarce. I’ve heard about nervous jokes at the beginning of meetings . . . but the conversations are happening. . . . American diplomacy has hardly screeched to a halt.” (Keller, 2011, p. 46)

In September 2011, the WikiLeaks saga took another turn with the unexpurgated release of WikiLeaks’ entire remaining inventory of more than 250,000 U.S. diplomatic cables. Assange and WikiLeaks claimed that the release was inadvertent, blaming it on the publication of the decryption key to the file containing the cables in a book by David Leigh, a journalist for *The Guardian*, and Luke Harding. (Like *The New York Times*, *El País*, *Le Monde*, and *Der Spiegel*, *The Guardian* had also worked with Assange to publish leaked information.) Other sources attributed the breakdown to disagreements

between Assange and two WikiLeaks staffers in fall 2010; the staffers quit the organization and took with them a server that contained the only complete encrypted file of State Department cables. One of the staffers, Daniel Domscheit-Berg (who became a critic of Assange and founder of a rival project, OpenLeaks), later returned many of the items on the server to Assange, including the encrypted file (Fogarty, 2011).

Hoping to avoid any repeated “defection” of files along with disgruntled associates, and in the wake of criminal charges brought by Swedish authorities over controversial allegations of sexual assault, Assange distributed 100,000 copies of the encrypted file to undisclosed sites in late 2010. At the time, Assange’s attorney, Mark Stephens, suggested that the Swedish charges were “politically motivated” and called the cache the “thermonuclear” option, to be unleashed if any unexpected harm came to Assange (“The War on Wikileaks: Fingered,” 2010, pp. 71–72).

However, David Leigh of *The Guardian* maintained that he had received the password from Assange, and was assured that it would expire within hours; as Leigh told the Associated Press (quoted by Al-Jazeera),

What we published much later in our book was obsolete and harmless. We did not disclose the URL where the file was located, and in any event, Assange had told us it would no longer exist. I don’t see how a member of the public could access such a file anyway, unless a WikiLeaks or ex-WikiLeaks person tells them where it is located and what the file was called. (“WikiLeaks Blames Guardian,” 2011)

In any event, the encrypted file was released in its entirety, including sensitive information such as the identities and contact information of hundreds of individuals that might have put them in personal danger (such details had been carefully edited from the materials published in earlier releases). The release cost WikiLeaks the confidence of some former allies and supporters. The five newspapers that had partnered with WikiLeaks in 2010 joined together to condemn the site in 2011 for having “lost control of the cables” (“Anger as WikiLeaks Releases,” 2011, para. 24). In a joint statement, the publishers deflected the blame aimed at *The Guardian*, said that the decision to release the unedited material was Assange’s alone, and that they

deplore the decision of WikiLeaks to publish the unredacted state department cables, which may put sources at risk. Our previous dealings with WikiLeaks were on the clear basis that we would only publish cables which had been subjected to a thorough joint editing and clearance process. We will continue to defend our previous collaborative publishing endeavour. We cannot defend the needless publication of the complete data—indeed, we are united in condemning it. (“Anger as WikiLeaks Releases,” 2011, para. 10–12)

In light of the controversies, some observers came to conclude that WikiLeaks might have run its course. No matter who was responsible for releasing the unedited State Department cables, “the damage is done . . . WikiLeaks itself seems in trouble” (“WikiLeaks: Swept Up,” 2011, p. 66). Speaking via video

link to the Sydney Opera House's Festival of Dangerous Ideas in 2011, even Julian Assange himself called WikiLeaks "a rather big boat with a lot of torpedo holes in it that has taken water in and is drifting along and we're doing our best to keep it afloat" ("WikiLeaks Is a Leaking Boat," 2011, para. 4). Both critics and sympathizers speculated that Assange's tendency to self-promotion and ego involvement in WikiLeaks, and his "shambolic and headstrong management style," had compromised the project, perhaps fatally ("Unpluggable," 2010, p. 34).

In late 2010, a European Arrest Warrant was issued for Assange, and Swedish authorities requested his extradition from Great Britain to face the sexual assault charges. Assange surrendered to U.K. authorities but was released on bail while appealing the extradition request. He was placed under house arrest, and restricted to the estate of a prominent British journalist who offered to house him because Assange had no U.K. residence of his own (Carr, 2011). Later, one Australian reporter suggested that Assange's fear of extradition was justified because Swedish authorities had already made arrangements to transfer Assange (who is an Australian citizen) to the United States immediately under a "temporary surrender" agreement, where a sealed indictment had already been issued by a secret grand jury (Pilger, 2011).

Throughout 2011, both Assange and WikiLeaks maintained a lower profile in the press, as Assange pursued legal appeals against his extradition to Sweden. Nonetheless, WikiLeaks remained active, releasing a new cache of incriminating records from the private U.S. intelligence firm Stratfor, which had been passed along to WikiLeaks by members of the hacktivist collective Anonymous. Julian Assange also announced plans to run for the Australian Senate; under Australian law a citizen who has not been convicted of a crime is eligible to stand for election ("Julian Assange to Run," 2012).

In mid-June 2012, however, the Supreme Court of Great Britain denied Assange's appeal of the extradition request. A few days later, WikiLeaks announced that he had entered the embassy of Ecuador in London, where he was granted political asylum; British authorities announced that if he left the embassy he would be arrested for violating his bail terms. As of this writing, Assange remains at the embassy, granting interviews to sympathetic journalists, giving public talks online, and opining on the consequences of the latest leaks of government secrets. He has taken a particular interest in the release of selected materials from vast troves of National Security Administration documents obtained by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden, who, like Assange, is in self-imposed exile to avoid capture and prosecution by U.S. government authorities. Assange has also irked his Ecuadorian hosts by producing and posting video clips, ostensibly as part of his political campaign, which lampoon his political rivals in Australia. He lost his bid for the Senate in September 2013.

In this essay I suggest that the WikiLeaks case, as important as it may be as a model for information transparency (Sifry, 2011), and regardless of its future prospects, is more important as an example of new challenges to authoritative, institutionalized knowledge—that is, how knowledge is created and circulated and how its value is established, and who gets to decide. Historically, social, cultural, political, and economic institutions have largely determined the nature of what is known and the limitations on who can know it. They exercise control through familiar systems of gatekeeping, authorship, evaluation, and sanctions for violating system norms.

However, in conditions that combine extensive technological systems of communication and mediation with declining confidence in traditional institutions of all kinds (law, education, government, religion, the press, and so on), different modes of knowledge generation, sharing, and value are emerging that feature decentralized, distributed forms of organization that downplay leaders, agendas, “vanguards,” and institutionally sanctioned expertise in favor of participation in the broadest sense and scale. I consider WikiLeaks from the perspective of what I have called *commons knowledge* (Lievrouw, 2011), in which participants generate and circulate knowledge collectively, using locally and collectively developed tools for knowledge organization and evaluation. Commons knowledge can be seen as a dynamic, organic, bottom-up process that provides a grassroots alternative to expert consensus, with all the advantages and risks that that implies. I review three principal characteristics of commons knowledge—Alexandrian ambitions and scope of knowledge collection, folksonomic modes of knowledge organization, and a normative distrust of knowledge authority—and assess the extent to which WikiLeaks might fit these characteristics and provide a useful example of commons knowledge.

As individual enterprises, projects such as WikiLeaks may be short-lived. However, it is worth considering whether they also may be part of a larger cultural shift associated with digital media that challenges the prerogatives of institutionalized expertise and knowledge authority in pervasively mediated societies and cultures—and which may herald new, perhaps more distributed, modes of establishing and evaluating knowledge.

WikiLeaks as Commons Knowledge

The rise of Web 2.0 over the last decade has brought with it a host of nervous terminology that reveals how conventional media production and consumption, with their clear but old-fashioned divisions between sources and receivers, has been thoroughly confounded with, and disrupted by, the point-to-point, interpersonal, immediate quality of online communication. “User-generated content,” “crowdsourcing,” “prosumer,” “peer production,” and a dozen more terms suggest the profound discomfort of media industries that have unexpectedly found themselves competing with anyone with a mobile device and a desire to share with the world—those whom Jay Rosen of New York University has memorably called “the people formerly known as the audience” (Rosen, 2006, para. 1). Traditional media industries’ campaigns to recast media content as “intellectual property,” their largely successful efforts to radically expand traditional copyrights to an ever-expanding universe of expressions and derivations for periods of time that recede ever farther into the future, and their relentless prosecution of even the most inconsequential uses of their products (including many that would ordinarily be considered fair use under U.S. law) only serve to underline what many observers consider to be a losing battle to retrench and retain business models based on fast-disappearing, industrial-style forms of creativity and ownership premised on distinct roles for producers and consumers.

Nonetheless, despite persistent sniping from established media, the collective creation, tending, and commentary on vast collections of information by communities of people with shared interests have become a routine part of life online. Projects range from participatory journalism (Deuze, Bruns, & Neuberger, 2007), to popular and fan-generated culture (Shirky, 2008), to countless blogs narrating the

passions of hobbyists and enthusiasts, to academic scholarship and science (Lievrouw, 2010), to political activism and whistleblowing, where WikiLeaks has, of course, become a prominent example. Activities such as these have opened opportunities for powerful new modes of knowledge production and collaboration, but they also have drawn charges (not least from media industries themselves) of amateurism, incompetence, deliberate falsification, misattribution, and misappropriation.

Indeed, cultural and state authorities have helped promulgate a “mean world” discourse (cf. Signorielli, 1990), which portrays the Internet as a site of upheaval, struggle, danger, and, not least, enormous personal risk (Lievrouw, 2012). Fears of terrorism, hacking, insurgencies, political uprisings, criminal networks, remotely launched botnets, fraud, sexual predation, and personal indiscretion have pervaded media coverage of the Internet and have transfixed the popular imagination. All are widely invoked by authorities to justify the expansion of private and state surveillance and security apparatuses that combine global scale and personal, pinpoint reach. As the contributions to this volume demonstrate, WikiLeaks has been the object of exactly this type of moral panic in the media and among institutional authorities, including criticism of the project itself, ad hominem attacks on its founder, and calls to outlaw or wall off its mission and activities.

Despite this contested landscape, however, the collaborative, collective, inclusive, and relatively gatekeeper-free arena of online communication continues to provide a platform for innovative approaches to generating and circulating commons knowledge. Such projects mobilize the efforts of hundreds or even thousands of like-minded people who make small, granular contributions to very large enterprises that might otherwise be too complex, esoteric, expensive, or, indeed, risky to undertake. The resources that are created also challenge or compete with more established, authoritative, expert-driven, and institutionally sanctioned methods of making, compiling, and evaluating knowledge. Here, I propose that, in all these respects, WikiLeaks can be seen as an instructive example of commons knowledge.

As noted earlier, commons knowledge projects have three principal features: They embody an *Alexandrian ideal* in terms of their ambitions for collecting vast repositories of knowledge; they typically adopt bottom-up, or *folksonomic*, approaches to knowledge organization and classification; and they tend to take an egalitarian view of participation based on a broad *distrust of knowledge authorities*. We can consider how, and to what extent, WikiLeaks fits these key characteristics.

The Alexandrian Ideal

To varying extents, commons knowledge projects exhibit Alexandrian ambitions and scope. The term refers to the lost library of Alexandria, which was built to hold all the knowledge of the ancient world (Lievrouw, 2010, 2011). Obviously, this idea did not originate with digital information technologies; similar aspirations toward universal, total knowledge collection, organization, and access have motivated intellectuals and academics at least since Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie* in the 18th century. The late 19th and especially the early 20th century spawned several colossal, comprehensive schemes for collecting and providing access to vast troves of information (many of which have been acknowledged by new media scholars as part of what might be called a “prehistory” of the Internet). Massive, contemporary

digital library projects, as well as more informal efforts like Wikipedia, have prompted some writers to describe their advocates as “new Alexandrians” (Tapscott & Williams, 2008, p. 151).

Before World War I, for example, Belgian lawyer and peace activist Paul Otlet developed the Universal Decimal Classification system, modeled broadly on the Dewey Decimal Classification, for organizing documents regardless of cultural and language origin. Together with Henri LaFontaine, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1913 for his work with the international peace movement, Otlet founded the Palais Mondial in Brussels, where he and other “documentalists”—progenitors of today’s field of information science—hoped to collect and organize “all the knowledge in the world,” which they envisioned as a web of interconnected networks of links among disparate resources (Rayward, 1994, 2003, 2008; Wright, 2008). Their Byzantine-style, purpose-built repository and center for scholarship, later renamed the Mundaneum, eventually grew to contain more than 15 million index cards in its catalog and many millions of “documents,” including printed materials, artworks, models, images, plans and diagrams, biological specimens, and devices. Neither the original vision of the Mundaneum nor its collection survived intact after the Nazi invasion of Belgium in 1940, when many of its materials were destroyed or lost. However, the remainder of the collection was moved to Mons, where a new Mundaneum museum and exhibit space was opened in 1998.

Similarly, in the 1930s the renowned novelist and essayist H. G. Wells (1938) called for the creation of a single, enormous shared encyclopedia, or “world brain,” that might overcome the parochialism and disciplinary and national boundaries of traditional academic learning (Rayward, 1999). Vannevar Bush, the director of the U.S. Office of Scientific Research and Development during World War II, wrote a famous essay in *The Atlantic* in 1945 entitled “As We May Think,” in which he argued that with the war’s end, American scientific and technological progress was being held back by massive growth in the volume of loosely organized, unsynthesized research publications. Bush proposed a device called memex that would permit users to connect diverse bodies of scientific information via “associative trails” and retrieve documents directly to a microfilm-based workstation (Bush, 1945). More recently, Tim Berners-Lee’s proposal for uniform resource locators (URLs), the hypertext transfer protocol (http), and hypertext markup language (HTML) widely hailed as the foundations of the World Wide Web, arose from many of the same concerns about undigested, unconnected pieces of digital information and the need to create systems that provide comprehensive access to and navigation among the widest possible range of documents and resources (Berners-Lee, 1989).

It is unsurprising that some of the most ambitious and encyclopedic projects online explicitly trace their origins to projects such as the Mundaneum, the World Brain, and memex. Wikipedia, for example, cites the Mundaneum as the inspiration for its own efforts and those of other massive “systematic knowledge projects” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mundaneum>). In March 2012, Google’s Belgian branch honored Paul Otlet and Henri LaFontaine by announcing a major collaboration with the Mundaneum museum in Mons, noting that “Our partnership with Mundaneum is part of a larger project to revive the memory of Europe’s computing pioneers” (Google, 2012, para. 8; see also Mundaneum, 2012; Pfanner, 2012). In his plan for what eventually became the World Wide Web, Tim Berners-Lee adapted a concept of hypertext links that was originally developed by Ted Nelson (1973), who in turn acknowledged memex as a key influence on his thinking.

Folksonomic Organization

The second distinctive feature of commons knowledge has to do with the ways that such projects classify and organize information. Where Otlet, Wells, Bush, and others contended that the growing tides of information and documents could be managed and made accessible only by creating and applying universal, expert-driven, and authoritative standards for cataloging and classification like Otlet's UDC, commons knowledge projects are more likely to let participants decide among themselves what topics and resources are significant, which are worth collecting and keeping, and how those resources should be organized. Tagging, bookmarking, comment and annotation systems, recommendation engines, and similar tools have encouraged the creation of dynamic, bottom-up, so-called *folksonomic* modes of knowledge organization that closely reflect users' interests, priorities, interactions, and search patterns.

Folksonomy is a play on the word *taxonomy*, a formal system for classifying items into specific, mutually exclusive categories or *taxa*. Authoritative taxonomies, such as the UDC and Dewey, are generated by experts who use specialized terms to label and organize items in a collection. Such standardized labels are called *metadata*, and the terms and their relations are compiled into "controlled vocabularies" and detailed thesauri. Peer-produced resources such as Wikipedia, user-contributed tags such as those used by Flickr or Facebook, and Twitter hashtags are organized around the ways that contributors perceive and represent the information they contribute and comment on. Thanks to hyperlinking, there is no need for an ultimate, authoritative vocabulary or set of metadata that is consistently used to describe the information contained in a given collection.

The advantages of a folksonomic approach include flexibility and responsiveness to changing ideas and cultural contexts; folksonomies allow information resources to be highly personalized, adaptable, and open to creative, counterintuitive, or alternative views of knowledge. Folksonomies let users present information and frame questions in their own language and in ways that may be more faithful to the social and cultural understandings of the moment. On the down side, however, an online world in which knowledge is always and necessarily incomplete, fragmented, and in flux is a dangerous weakness from the viewpoint of established disciplines, experts, and authoritative cultural institutions. Folksonomies can be idiosyncratic and virtually impossible to reproduce from one situation or search to another. By using their own "natural language" (as in a Google search, for example) rather than specialist terms to organize and look for information, users may easily miss materials that might be relevant to their interests; indeed, given the idiosyncrasy of natural language searching, whole categories of relevant information might be overlooked or excluded. This problem has recently been the object of a growing debate among critics who worry that the growing reliance on systems that tailor or customize what they present to users, especially as a technique for gathering highly targeted marketing information about individuals, creates "filter bubbles" that segregate people into ever-narrower social and knowledge enclaves with little incentive or opportunity to look outside of their particular cultural, demographic, or belief groups (Pariser, 2011).

Distrust of Knowledge Authorities

When the Alexandrian ideal of comprehensive collecting is paired with folksonomic modes of knowledge classification, a third feature of commons knowledge emerges. Such projects are often characterized by a distrust of knowledge authorities and institutions, and instead favor a more grassroots or egalitarian form of participation by experts and amateurs alike. This antiauthoritarian tendency can be traced to early, libertarian "hacker culture" among engineers and computer scientists in the 1960s and 1970s, many of whose ethical commitments (knowledge sharing, open-source design, strong individualism and self-reliance, unrestricted access to knowledge and technology as the foundations of a good society) are still evident in contemporary Internet culture (Turner, 2006). From this countercultural perspective, expertise should be based on "no other criteria than technical virtuosity and accomplishment . . . not 'bogus' criteria such as degrees, age, race, or position" (Nissenbaum, 2004, p. 197). Tapscott and Williams (2008) argue that what participants in projects like Wikipedia oppose is not expertise *per se* but claims of privilege or priority based solely on professional or institutional status: "Expertise is by no means shunned on Wikipedia, but 'credentialism' is clearly discouraged" (p. 74).

This approach certainly has its critics. Some accuse advocates of crowdsourcing and peer production of anti-intellectualism, indeed of alienating the very experts who might add the most to their projects (e.g., Duguid, 2006). Skeptical observers contend that participants' self-selection and volunteerism introduce risks of bias, misrepresentation, favoritism, and advocacy for particular points of view that may be inadvertently or deliberately presented as neutral, factual, reliable information. Others, however, point out that amateurism is not equivalent to ignorance. Writing in an academic philosophy journal, Wikipedia cofounder Larry Sanger argues that "There is little support for the notion that the distinctive occupations that require expertise are being undermined. It is also implausible that Wikipedia and its like might take over the epistemic leadership roles of experts" (Sanger, 2009, p. 52). Philosopher and information scientist Don Fallis has noted that:

People who voluntarily choose to write on a certain topic are likely to have at least some degree of reliability on that topic. Indeed, there are many amateur ornithologists, amateur astronomers, and so on who do not have academic credentials but who have quite a bit of expertise. (Fallis, 2008, p. 1670)

In the sciences, Freeman Dyson contends that widely available computers and the Internet may have opened the way for a "new era of youthful exuberance in which amateurs will again have an important share of the action" as they did in the earliest days of amateur science and natural philosophy (Dyson, 2002, p. 7). Technology pundit Clay Shirky (2008) has hailed "mass amateurism," the elision of clear distinctions among readers, writers, editors, experts, and amateurs, and the challenge this poses to the worldview and prerogatives of established professions.

It is worth noting, too, that expertise and institutional authority are no guarantee that knowledge production is conducted in a disinterested, unbiased, complete, or reliable way. A historical analysis of the field of biotechnology, for example, demonstrates that its market-driven rise has driven scientists away from traditional norms of scientific communication and toward a retreat from publication (in which

scientists and investors withhold findings or claim private ownership or secrecy to maximize priority claims and revenue potential), systematic publication bias (skewing published results toward favorable findings and popular/successful researchers), the erosion of peer review (as fewer disinterested referees are available to review colleagues' work), and constraints on informal interaction (prohibiting scientists from sharing any findings with colleagues that might place their work at a competitive disadvantage) (Lievrouw, 2004). Indeed, given the recent normative shifts in institutional science, some observers have argued precisely *for* the ethical superiority of amateur and peer-produced knowledge projects, because their features of cooperation and mutual critique/problem-solving provide opportunities for "virtuous behavior" that can be carried over into larger social relations (Benkler & Nissenbaum, 2006).

To what extent does WikiLeaks fit these three characteristics of commons knowledge? With respect to the Alexandrian ideal, WikiLeaks does not point to the Mundaneum or the World Brain as its inspiration. Yet in its own "about" pages, as well as its well-publicized whistleblowing activities, similar themes resonate. For example, WikiLeaks' insistence on radical "transparency" as a necessary condition for accountability, exposing impunity, and justice assumes a very strong understanding of the term (Sifry, 2011). Indeed, transparency in the sense that WikiLeaks applies it suggests that the mere revelation of an incriminating fact here or there is simply insufficient to call authority to account, since it is a trivial matter for authorities to flatly deny or discredit any single disconnected fact or revelation or to pull it out of context. Accountability, from the WikiLeaks perspective, is only possible when authority is confronted with huge and incontrovertible stocks of evidence that interconnect to create a total, systematic picture of wrongdoing or exploitation.

In fact, WikiLeaks' most notorious revelations have been of just this sort, involving tens or hundreds of thousands of pieces of interrelated information, sometimes released gradually but often in deluges of "raw" documents, with mainstream journalists and the general public invited to comb through and interpret the material. As a leader in the *Economist* put it in late 2010, WikiLeaks has had a profound effect on whistleblowing, and perhaps journalism, by the "sheer volume" of its revelations: In addition to the 250,000 U.S. State Department cables described earlier, releases have included one set of more than 90,000 documents about the Afghan war and nearly 400,000 documents on the Iraq war ("Read Cables and Red Faces," 2010; "Unpluggable," 2010). Prior to WikiLeaks, such "megaleaks" were certainly unprecedented, at least in terms of quantity ("Unpluggable," 2010, p. 34), though, at the time, some observers doubted that they would make a real difference for the substance of investigative journalism or the balance of institutional power (Lovink & Riemens, 2010). Still, Edward Snowden's more recent, strategic releases of materials documenting the NSA's pervasive surveillance and capture of Americans' personal communications, assisted by journalists Glenn Greenwald and Laura Poitras, has had a decisive effect on debates among lawmakers and the general public in both the U.S. and Europe about the necessity, effectiveness and lawfulness of such massive government data dragnets. In some respects, the scale and scope of revelations by Snowden, Greenwald and Poitras have taken a page from the WikiLeaks playbook. However, they have also clearly learned from Assange's mistakes, taking a far more controlled, deliberate and selective approach to releasing evidence of clandestine government activities. In any case, to the extent that comprehensiveness is a core aspect of the Alexandrian ideal, and that WikiLeaks has been designed as a conduit for the collection and circulation of comprehensive, authentic bodies of

evidence of institutional malfeasance, incompetence, and the illegitimate exercise of power, WikiLeaks manifests something of an Alexandrian sensibility.

Regarding folksonomic knowledge organization, again WikiLeaks does not explicitly claim any particular philosophy or technique of classifying the information it receives and releases to the public; rather, the approach seems unsystematic, or possibly opportunistic, depending on both the information received and the way it is framed by those who provide it. Nonetheless, at least in the “Cablegate” collection of more than 250,000 U.S. State Department diplomatic cables, a folksonomic scheme of organization seems to be emerging. On WikiLeaks’ own page for the embassy cables, visitors can search them using a few coarse descriptors, such as date, security classification level, or country of origin (<http://www.wikileaks.org/cablegate.html#>). But the page also provides a link to a separate site where a more detailed organization of the cables has been generated out of full-text searches and tagging by visitors (see <http://www.cablegatesearch.net/search.php?qto=20100228>). Tag clouds showing hundreds of user-generated tags for the cables, and their relative prominence or popularity, have been organized into five broad, color-coded categories: countries, origins, subjects, programs, and organizations (see <http://www.cablegatesearch.net/browse.php>). Although the site is still under construction, visitors to this page can click on any given tag to see the number of cables that have been tagged with that term and the intersection with other tags. So, as a practical matter, for at least one major cache of documents, WikiLeaks is employing a folksonomic strategy to organize and provide access to the information it holds.

Of the three features of commons knowledge, however, WikiLeaks’ distrust of knowledge authorities stands out as virtually definitive. Indeed, the whole premise of whistleblowing sites such as WikiLeaks, OpenLeaks, and their predecessor, Cryptome, is that institutional authorities cannot be trusted to provide full and fair information about their own activities and interests, and in fact will do whatever they can to monopolize information and conceal their questionable or controversial activities from the publics who are most likely to be affected by them. Like journalists, whistleblowing and drop-box sites attempt to act as watchdogs on institutions and the power they wield.

Moreover, authorities (especially governments, private corporations, security firms, the military, and other organizations that tend to attract the scrutiny of journalists, activists, and whistleblowers) routinely expect—often backed up by the force of law—that individual citizens surrender information about themselves and their activities to an extent that the institutions themselves would never accept. Of course, this asymmetry is nothing new. But online networks have given individuals and activist organizations a degree of technical leverage that helps level the proverbial playing field, which is precisely why institutions are so keenly interested in locking down any technology uses or information flows that lie outside institutional controls. The key mechanism for guaranteeing transparency and accountability is not merely the existence of communication channels between institutional authorities and the public, but sustaining open channels among members of the public themselves where information can be shared. As Micah Sifry has noted (putting a twist on Jay Rosen’s phrase),

In the networked age, where the watched can also be the watchers, what is at stake is nothing less than the credibility of authority itself . . . the people formerly known as the authorities can re-earn that trust only by being more transparent . . . today when a

crisis strikes, information moves faster than the “authorities” can know using their own, slower methods. WikiLeaks, and other channels for the unauthorized release and spread of information, are symptoms of this change, not its cause. (Sifry, 2011, p. 147)

A Shifting Institutional Terrain?

Whether WikiLeaks will outlive Julian Assange’s legal problems is still an open question. But even if it folds, as the Edward Snowden case demonstrates, a host of other outlets, activists and whistleblowers will surely continue and expand such efforts online. Institutional gatekeeping, secrecy, and prosecutorial overreach will continue to be challenged by technological workarounds and activist collaborations. Ultimately, however, the significance of WikiLeaks is less about technology *per se* than it is about the challenges to the institutional control and legitimation of information and knowledge posed by growing public demands for participation in knowledge creation and use, and the (perhaps fitful and contested) emergence of new values and expectations of institutional accountability; the “end of WikiLeaks” has been called “the beginning of an era” (“WikiLeaks: Swept Up,” 2011, p. 66). Even WikiLeaks’ most strident critics suggest that the institutional terrain has begun to shift, and the role that WikiLeaks has played in that change.

While I do not regard Assange as a partner, and I would hesitate to describe what WikiLeaks does as journalism, it is chilling to contemplate the possible government prosecution of WikiLeaks for making secrets public, let alone the passage of new laws to punish the dissemination of classified information. . . . Taking legal recourse against a government official who violates his trust by divulging secrets he is sworn to protect is one thing. But criminalizing the publication of such secrets by someone who has no official obligation seems to me to run up against the First Amendment and the best traditions of this country. (Keller, 2011, p. 47)

Calling Mr Assange a terrorist . . . is deeply counterproductive. His cyber-troops do not fly planes into buildings, throw acid at schoolgirls or murder apostates. . . . The big danger is that America is provoked into bending or breaking its own rules, straining alliances, eroding credibility and—because it will not be able to muzzle WikiLeaks—ultimately seeming impotent. In recent years America has promoted the internet as a menace to foreign censorship. That sounds tinny now. . . . The best lessons to bear in mind are those learned in such costly fashion during the past decade of the “war on terror.” Deal with the source of the problem, not just its symptoms. Keep the moral high ground. And pick fights you can win. (“The Right Reaction,” 2010, p. 16)

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