



## Is WikiLeaks Challenging the Paradigm of Journalism? Boundary Work and Beyond

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### Introduction

WikiLeaks exists in a peculiar and illustrative tension with journalism that dramatizes larger unfolding debates about the authority, status, and future of journalism. This article explores what the WikiLeaks saga can tell us, in a broader sense, about pressing anxieties of the journalism profession and, relatedly, the discipline of journalism studies. The article explores how journalists and journalism scholars have discussed the revelations of WikiLeaks as well as the organization itself. I suggest that, whereas some observers have argued that WikiLeaks heralds a radical transformation in understandings of journalism, others are keen to see it as just another source—a phenomenon easily subsumed under existing definitions of journalism and deployed in its service. The article investigates the ways in which WikiLeaks challenges conventional paradigms of news coverage insofar as it provides—and publishes—the investigative materials that journalists themselves usually take pride in uncovering. Through this activity, the organization's emergence reflects larger developments representing a shake-up in conventional hierarchies of voice and access to the public sphere. At the same time, WikiLeaks has also served as a novel and unique type of news source, and the ambiguous figure of Julian Assange has been variously appropriated in news narratives as a heroic defender of free expression—described as a courageous whistleblower willing to speak truth to power on the one hand, and an autistic renegade, recluse, and alleged rapist on the other (e.g., Rusbridger, 2011, p. 6). These conflicting and ever-evolving accounts of the organization and its shape-shifting front man coexist in media coverage and scholarly debates and reflect a more profound set of questions about the changing nature of journalism and, hence, the need to refine understandings of the profession and our conceptual tools for studying it.

### Situating WikiLeaks and Its Challenge to the Journalistic Paradigm

Although WikiLeaks was launched in 2006 and first started leaking prominent stories as early as 2007, with revelations about Guantanamo Bay operating procedures, it took an early 2008 court case before the media began to take notice of the organization and its relationship to journalism. I conducted a Nexis UK search for the keywords "Wikileaks" and "journalism" in major world newspapers beginning December 4, 2007, when the first leaks were made public, up to December 3, 2011. The first story to appear in major world newspapers about Assange's work and its implications for journalism was an editorial in *The New York Times*, published on February 21, 2008, and reprinted in many newspapers

around the world. The editorial established what was to become a prominent journalistic discourse in these early days—one that sided with WikiLeaks in its professed battle for free expression and described the organization as a purveyor of “Internet journalism,” suggesting the emergence of a new and revolutionary category signaling what Sifry (2011) has characterized as “the age of transparency.”

The rise of Internet journalism has opened a new front in the battle to protect free speech. A federal judge last week ordered the disabling of WikiLeaks.org, a muckraking Web site. That stifles important speech and violates the First Amendment. It should be reversed, and WikiLeaks should be allowed to resume operations. (“Stifling Online Speech,” 2008, para. 1)

*The New York Times*, of course, later became one of a handful of major international newspapers to work closely with Assange to secure the publication of leaked documents (Leigh & Harding, 2011), but its stance was not unique. The tenor of the coverage of this first high-profile leak—and the furor and legal battle it caused—was mirrored in later cases, as WikiLeaks was heralded as a defender of free speech. The organization began to make major news headlines in April 2010, after leaking footage of a U.S. helicopter gunship killing Iraqi citizens and two Reuters journalists on a Baghdad street in July 2007, which was edited into a deliberately editorializing and provocative video titled *Collateral Murder*. A widely syndicated article by U.S. journalist Bernard Lagan, published on April 10, 2010, highlighted some of the ambiguities surrounding journalistic assessments of WikiLeaks:

Clearly somebody inside the U.S. military has begun leaking—elevating WikiLeaks and Assange overnight from mainstream journalism’s fringes to a must-see news-breaker.

“This is a whole new world of how stories get out,” declared Scree Screenivasan, professor of digital media at New York’s Columbia University Journalism School.

Yet for all its ideals in support of openness and freedom of information, those behind WikiLeaks—especially its key founder, Assange—dwell in shadows and intrigue. They have no headquarters, no offices and the barest formal structure. Assange himself is particularly elusive, part, obviously, through necessity and part through his mercurial makeup. (Lagan, 2010, para. 9)

This story articulates key ambiguities and tensions that came to represent the complex dominant narrative around the organization: On the one hand, WikiLeaks was seen to represent—through both its discursive construction *and* its practices—ideals of openness and freedom of information, which coincide neatly with the normative foundations of journalists’ professional self-understanding. On the other hand, the secretive and elusive behavior of its enigmatic front man, Julian Assange, rubbed against this narrative and generated a contradiction between the abstract but compelling normative ideals of the organization and its less compelling practice as embodied in its leader. Further, as the organization evolved—and particularly following the leaking of embassy cables from U.S. missions around the world,

starting in November 2010—it came into open conflict with both governments and news organizations because of its deliberately renegade status.<sup>1</sup>

Much of the coverage of the organization in the early days emphasized the revolutionary potential of the WikiLeaks model in relation to models of news production. As an opinion piece in Canada's *Globe and Mail* pointed out:

The treasure trove of information released on Sunday was obtained not by investigative reporters working for the old-line mainstream media but by a formerly obscure website called WikiLeaks. Its raison d'être is whistle-blowing on a worldwide scale. WikiLeaks must now be counted among the most influential news outlets in the world. And the untouchable way in which it operates marks a seismic shift in the age-old struggle between the authorities and the whistle-blowers. (Wente, 2010, para. 2)

Here were the first hints that WikiLeaks was beginning to be viewed in a way that did more than coincide with journalistic principles of free speech: It also potentially competed with news organizations as it came to be seen as "among the most influential news outlets in the world." At the same time, this position reflected an emerging common-sense representation of WikiLeaks as a whistleblowing group (see also Thorsen, Sreedharan & Allan, 2012). Whistleblowers are an interesting and complex category in journalism. Research has found that they are generally portrayed favorably or neutrally by journalists (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hunt, 2012). Their work is celebrated as a line of defense against abuses of power, ensuring transparency and accountability in relation to society's power holders. Here, the goals of whistleblowing coincide nicely with those of journalism: One of the key roles of the media in a democratic society is to hold public and private institutions and power holders to account (Ettema, 2007, p. 144), and ideas of a watchdog role are central to the self-understanding of journalists around the world (e.g., Mwesige, 2004; Waisbord, 2000). At the same time, whistleblowers are useful to journalists as sources of information that would otherwise be unavailable, potentially providing the raw ingredients for important and career-enhancing stories (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hunt, 2012). However, as illustrated poignantly by the case of WikiLeaks, it is also true that journalists wish to maintain the professional privilege of reporting the story and that any attempt by whistleblowers to claim this privilege represents a trespass on the grounds of professional privilege. As Benkler (2013, p. 11) put it, the "traditional news industry's treatment of WikiLeaks throughout this episode can best be seen as an effort by older media to preserve their own identity against the perceived threat posed by the new networked model." The tension between the view of WikiLeaks as a source for journalists to mine for useful material and as a news provider in its own right came to the forefront as WikiLeaks began to make deliberate and increasingly loud claims about its status as a new form of journalistic practice. A *Guardian* article pointed out some of the key issues arising from the epistemological and professional uncertainty unleashed by Julian Assange:

Assange, who describes what he does as a mix of hi-tech investigative journalism and advocacy, foresees a day when any confidential document, from secret orders that allow

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<sup>1</sup> For a time line detailing the most important revelations facilitated by WikiLeaks, see, for example, "WikiLeaks" (n.d.).

our own governments to spy on us down to the bossy letters from your children's school, will be posted on WikiLeaks for the whole world to see. And that, Assange believes, will change everything.

But there are those who fear that WikiLeaks is more like an intelligence service than it would care to admit—a shadowy, unaccountable organisation that tramples on individual privacy and other rights. And like so many others who have claimed to be acting in the name of the people, there are those who fear it risks oppressing them. (McGreal, 2010, para. 4–5)

This editorial demonstrated a discernible shift in journalistic assessments of WikiLeaks as its notoriety and influence grew—away from a simple view of the organization as a largely benign force enlisted in journalism's never-ending battle for free speech, and toward a concern about its lack of accountability. In raising these questions, *The Guardian* editorial—and other similar pieces—pinpointed what might be seen as a key difference between WikiLeaks and journalism: the fact that professional journalism is structurally defined by its accountability and openness, whereas WikiLeaks relies on the same practices of secrecy that define the very institutions it is trying to undermine through its disclosures. As time went on, journalistic and academic accounts began to more carefully hone such fundamental distinctions between professional journalism and WikiLeaks to question any easy equivalencies between the two practices. In an exploration of the ethical implications of WikiLeaks, Lisa Lynch (2009), one of the first scholars to pay attention to the group, argued that:

In a moment when investigative journalism is recognizably in crisis, WikiLeaks has emerged as something of a strange bedfellow to a beleaguered industry, one that holds itself up as a champion of principles many journalists hold dear—freedom of information and the sanctity of the source—yet embeds these principles in a framework of cyberlibertarianism that is frequently at odds with the institutional ethics of journalists and editors. (pp. 316–317)

German media scholar Barbara Thomass (2011) pointed out that an organization of WikiLeaks' shadowy, transnational, and secretive nature lacks the oversight that keeps conventional media organizations in check, such as press councils and codes of ethics. However ineffectual they may be, she argued, they still provide a means for holding information providers to account:

There is no similar authority which can hold WikiLeaks accountable. Moreover, WikiLeaks refuses any responsibility except for the veracity of the documents and the security of the sources. Its principle is transparency—not for its own organization, a fact which is criticized heavily—without regard for the consequences. It is obvious that WikiLeaks selects which leaked information it will make public, but the criteria of this selection have remained obscure until now, and it remains to be seen if WikiLeaks and similar institutions will develop their own ethical code for giving a platform to whistleblowers. Whatever this ethical code, if it does emerge, will look like, it will be confronted with the problem of any ethical decision-making code: to find a balance between two competing

values. Apart from this, it is still the media and the journalists, the gatekeepers making WikiLeaks publications understandable to the general public, who bear an important part of the responsibility for publishing WikiLeaks information. (Thomass, 2011, p. 22)

Thomass's analysis illustrates an assumption underlying many academic and journalistic assessments critical of Wikileaks: that despite the prominence of this novel formation, conventional news organizations continue to play the role of gatekeepers and hence mediate the information provided to the public.

To fully understand the contexts in which these discussions unfolded, it is important to consider the concomitant rise of "we media," "networked journalism," "citizen journalism," "user-generated content," "prosumers," and "the people formerly known as the audience" (e.g., Allan & Thorsen, 2009; Beckett, 2010; Bruns, 2008), to mention just a few salient and frequently bandied-about terms used to describe the increasing involvement of audiences in the production of journalism, the ever-more decentralized and distributed forms of news production, and the perceived democratization of journalism resulting from this. These developments have also led to a concern among journalists and journalism scholars about the future of journalism (Wahl-Jorgensen, Garcia-Blanco, & Cushion, 2011) and, associated with this, a proliferation of discursive work to defend the profession and its practitioners. The emerging critical discourses on WikiLeaks could, in a sense, be seen as a form of boundary work, or an attempt to delimit and reinforce divisions between the fields of knowledge represented by journalism and WikiLeaks (Schudson & Anderson, 2009, p. 96). Informing discussions of the practices of WikiLeaks and the nature of its relationship to journalism are larger questions around the "definition of and jurisdiction over particular forms of expertise" (Schudson & Anderson, 2009, p. 96)—in this case, the professional skills and qualities required to report the news. At the same time as discussions of WikiLeaks reaffirmed the importance of journalism, they therefore also told us much about its core professional ideals, widely invoking ideas of transparency and accountability. Julian Assange himself was instrumental in feeding the discussion about the complex relationship between his information-sharing enterprise and conventional journalism practice by making grand (if not always consistent) statements about his journalistic intentions. In a *New Yorker* profile (Khatchadourian, 2010) published before the release of *Collateral Murder*, Assange described his project as follows:

I want to set up a new standard: "scientific journalism." If you publish a paper on DNA, you are required, by all the good biological journals, to submit the data that has informed your research—the idea being that people will replicate it, check it, verify it. So this is something that needs to be done for journalism as well. There is an immediate power imbalance, in that readers are unable to verify what they are being told, and that leads to abuse. (cited in Beckett & Ball, 2012, p. 44)

Here Assange not only proclaimed his membership in the journalistic community but further implied that his work could transform it for the better. Supporters of the WikiLeaks project were clearly well aware of these central epistemic questions and their implications for the legitimacy of the organization. As a result, the careful work done by WikiLeaks itself as well as its media collaborators in the process of verifying and releasing documents was emphasized in sympathetic accounts seeking to validate

the enterprise. For example, *The Guardian's* editor, Alan Rusbridger (2011), in his account of his paper's involvement in the publication of the embassy leaks and other major stories, stressed the careful journalistic work done by the paper's reporters as well as the great lengths to which they had gone to verify the veracity of the published information:

What now began was a rather traditional journalistic operation, albeit using skills of data analysis and visualisation which were unknown in newsrooms until fairly recently. . . . The first thing to do was to build a search engine that could make sense of the data, the next to bring in foreign correspondents and foreign affairs analysts with detailed knowledge of the Afghan and Iraq conflict. The final piece of the journalistic heavy lifting was to introduce a redaction process so that nothing we published could imperil any vulnerable sources or compromise active special operations. (Rusbridger, 2011, p. 5)

Similarly, *The Observer's* reader's editor wrote:

The WikiLeaks saga was an alliance of modern technology and good, old-fashioned journalism: of those 250,000 documents, fewer than 2,000 have been published in an meticulous [*sic*] editing process across five newspapers that sought out the best stories from a mountain of 300 million words. (Pritchard, 2011, para. 7)

*New York Times* media writer David Carr (2010) offered a nuanced analysis that acknowledged both the innovative elements of WikiLeaks' practices and the indispensable role of high-profile news media in underwriting them:

In one sense, the carefully choreographed exercise represented a new kind of hybrid journalism. WikiLeaks was more than just a source, it was a publisher. And however it got the goods, WikiLeaks found willing collaborators in the mainstream eager to both compete on a big story and to serve their readers.

But the episode also served as an affirmation of traditional journalism practices. WikiLeaks might have simply dumped the data on its Web site for all to see, but chose instead to engage mainstream publications which sifted, annotated and made sense of it all. (para. 6–7)

These accounts, then, demonstrate a common mechanism whereby the work of WikiLeaks was not accepted wholesale as journalism in and of itself, but rather as yet another (very useful and welcome, if sometimes troublesome and complex) source of information in the public interest that could and should be published only after careful vetting, editing, or redaction done on the basis of "traditional," "good, old-fashioned" journalism. It laid bare the paradox that access to information is at the heart of the profession, and that it sometimes requires hard and gritty work that the difficult climate of journalism doesn't always allow for. As Christensen (2010, para. 10) pointed out, "The WikiLeaks case speaks to the power of technology to make us re-think what we mean by 'journalism' in the early 21st century. But it also

consolidates the place of mainstream journalism within contemporary culture." WikiLeaks, in other words, achieved its central importance not because of its challenge to the existing media ecology, but because of its ability to work successfully within it (e.g., Beckett & Ball, 2012, p. 83).

To observers, the new form of hybrid journalism represented by WikiLeaks was born of the opportunities of the networked era (e.g., Beckett & Ball, 2012; Chadwick, 2013) and might have transformative and emancipatory consequences (e.g., Thorsen, Sreedharan, & Allan, 2013). As political scientist Andrew Chadwick (2013) has suggested, this "is a sociotechnical system with affordances that structure the principle of anonymity and it rests upon a keen awareness of how the Internet has changed the traditional dynamics of source-journalist relations during whistleblowing" (p. 95). But as a form of journalism, it could nonetheless only sustain itself through the collaboration and complicity of legacy news media.

Such a position is symptomatic of a broader set of journalistic discourses whereby emerging and potentially threatening practices, including user-generated content and citizen journalism, are absorbed into conventional hierarchies of newsgathering as mere sources for journalistic work (see also Williams, Wardle, & Wahl-Jorgensen, 2010). At the same time, it calls attention to a structural feature of journalism's self-understanding: As Brian McNair (1998) has pointed out, the epistemic authority of journalism—and hence, our trust in the work of journalists—rests on the basis of the profession's privileged claims to truth-telling. Such a belief underlies the ideals of the journalism profession and is closely tied to key journalistic strategic rituals, including ideals of objectivity, and the celebration of accuracy, fairness, and balance in reporting. It provides media producers with a set of ready-made justifications for their practices, but also grants them the privilege of being the masters of our collective truths—a privilege clearly worth fighting for.

To those supportive of the revolutionary potential of this new form of whistleblowing journalism, WikiLeaks represented a welcome and necessary opportunity for the profession to rethink its practices and ideals in a new technological, social, and political age. Along those lines, one article suggested that the organization's model signaled a radical break with conventional journalistic hierarchies and information-gathering models, arguing that journalists should "become data hubs themselves" (Baack, 2011) enabling the kind of data-driven journalism exemplified by WikiLeaks. Charlie Beckett, the British academic, journalist, and blogger, pointed out that the developments represented by WikiLeaks mirror those in the newsroom insofar as they increasingly rely on "networked forms of journalism involving crowd-sourcing, blogging, and public participation" (Beckett, 2011, para. 1). To Beckett, the ethos of WikiLeaks, in its interest in a wide audience, a broader social impact, and the revelation of previously hidden information, has significant similarities to that of journalism. He thus suggested that:

In this sense the argument about whether WikiLeaks should be defined as journalism is cyclical. Those that argue that WikiLeaks is not "journalism" are defining the term to exclude forms of news mediation that they do not wish to give an official stamp. Those that argue that WikiLeaks easily fits into their definition of journalism are in danger of ignoring how it challenges the validity of those categories.

The debate about “WikiLeaks as Journalism” is really a debate about what journalism is or is becoming. Instead of asking whether WikiLeaks is journalism or not, we should ask “what kind of journalism is WikiLeaks creating?” The challenge to the rest of journalism is to come up with something as good if not better. (Beckett, 2011, para. 3–4)

Beckett’s observations highlight an emerging uneasy truce between journalism and WikiLeaks—one that recognizes the categorical instability introduced by the practices of WikiLeaks, but also views journalism as an evolving and dynamic life form that is always challenged, and never more so than now. The inevitable conclusion is that journalism cannot survive merely on the basis of the boundary work of journalists and academics, but that ways of practicing and talking about journalism must change to acknowledge the profound nature of the challenges represented by networked or “hybrid” journalism—a new arena into which WikiLeaks has entered as a prominent, but by no means unique or solitary player.

### **Conclusion**

Both academics and journalists have recognized the spectacular and unprecedented emergence of WikiLeaks as a critical moment in terms of understanding the future of journalism—one that raised profound questions about the profession and its methods, and was deployed to fundamentally consolidate its core values, beliefs, and practices. At the same time, WikiLeaks did not operate in isolation, publishing its treasure trove of previously secret information to an already-constituted mass audience. While journalists—particularly in the initial stages—expressed appreciation for the free speech beliefs encapsulated by the WikiLeaks project, they also, for the most part, held on to a discourse that justified journalism as a distinctive professional practice associated with skills of factual verification, accountability, and openness. Scholarly discourses closely resembled those of journalists in their normative impetus. Academics could be seen to conduct back-up boundary work, supporting the endeavor of the field they studied and thus seeking to ensure its continued viability. This demonstrates that the journalistic field and the field of scholarship on journalism exist in a complex interdependent relationship. In particular, the scholarly field depends on the health of the journalistic profession for its cultural capital. In this sense, both rely heavily on journalism’s continued success.

In the case of WikiLeaks, the central debates have revolved around the need to restate and defend the core values of journalism, including the commitment to truth-telling and the accountability that characterize the profession. Scholars and journalists have been keen to stress the status of WikiLeaks—its novel nature notwithstanding—as “just another source,” affirming the dominant epistemic hierarchy of journalism. Although WikiLeaks clearly challenged conventional—and more thoroughly accountable—forms of information gathering and dissemination, its lasting impact has been a series of remarkable revelations based on carefully orchestrated collaboration with a few mainstream news media (Leigh & Harding, 2011) and a new set of strategies for communicating these revelations (Brevini, Hintz & McCurdy, 2013). Fundamentally, WikiLeaks demonstrates that new technologies can be harnessed for free expression and circulation of information—core journalistic values in which the profession remains heavily invested and for which it is willing to fight. To scholars of journalism, the story of WikiLeaks is a reminder that we may need to shift our understandings of the practices and epistemologies of journalism, but remain alert to the ways in which both journalists and academics are necessarily complicit with the defense of a professional



paradigm whose nature is changing more swiftly than ever, and whose core self-understanding is therefore under challenge. More nuanced and emerging analyses are suggesting that the boundary work evident in many discussions of WikiLeaks may be a Sisyphean task—never-ending, frustrating, and fruitless—but that it may also be a necessary step in uncovering a fuller understanding of journalism's future. Nonetheless, I have also suggested that the long-term viability of journalism requires us to move beyond merely defending the paradigm and toward an appreciation of how it may be changing, for better or worse.

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