



WikiLeaks and the Afterlife of *Collateral Murder*

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In this essay, the author considers not only what is shown in the WikiLeaks *Collateral Murder* video but reflects upon what the act of uploading this video symbolized and continues to symbolize and how the multifaceted symbolic value of the video has led to its steady inscription and reinscription into the public consciousness during a wide variety of popular and political debates. Apart from the disturbing content of the film, showing a potentially criminal act, the author argues that the uploading of the film was itself an act of dissent and, thus, a challenge to U.S. power. This combination of content and context makes the WikiLeaks *Collateral Murder* video an interesting case study that touches upon several key areas within academic study.

Keywords: WikiLeaks, journalism, war, visual culture, Iraq, Collateral Murder, video

Introduction

On April 5, 2010, WikiLeaks released *Collateral Murder*, a video showing a July 12, 2007, U.S. Apache attack helicopter attack upon individuals in New Baghdad. Among the more than 23 people killed by the 30-mm cannon fire were two Reuters journalists. WikiLeaks published this statement in conjunction with the release:

WikiLeaks has released a classified U.S. military video depicting the indiscriminate slaying of over a dozen people in the Iraqi suburb of New Baghdad—including two Reuters news staff. Reuters has been trying to obtain the video through the Freedom of Information Act, without success since the time of the attack. The video, shot from an Apache helicopter gun-sight, clearly shows the unprovoked slaying of a wounded Reuters employee and his rescuers. Two young children involved in the rescue were also seriously wounded. (WikiLeaks, 2010a)

The response to the clip was swift from supporters and opponents alike. The U.S. military and some in the U.S. media—including the then-editor of *The New York Times*, Bill Keller—pointed out that the video was only an edited portion of a much longer video and that WikiLeaks had deliberately cut the film to downplay the potential threat to U.S. soldiers and the context within which the attack took place. Even

the title of the release, *Collateral Murder*, was critiqued as anything but the mere presentation of facts and as a de facto antiwar editorial. In response, Julian Assange stated in an interview:

You can see that they also deliberately target Saeed, a wounded man there on the ground, despite their earlier belief that they didn't have the rules of engagement—that the rules of engagement did not permit them to kill Saeed when he was wounded. When he is rescued, suddenly that belief changed. You can see in this particular image he is lying on the ground and the people in the van have been separated, but they still deliberately target him. This is why we called it *Collateral Murder* . . . this particular event—this is clearly murder. (Al Jazeera English, 2010)

In a number of earlier pieces (Christensen, 2008, 2009, 2011b), I examined the use of YouTube by U.S. soldiers during the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan and how the videos uploaded not only recorded events but how the very act(s) of their creation was symbolically and politically important. In much the same way, in this essay I consider not only what is shown in the *Collateral Murder* video but also reflect upon what the act of uploading this video symbolized and continues to symbolize and how the multifaceted symbolic value of the video has led to its steady inscription and reinscription into the public consciousness during a wide variety of popular and political debates.

Collateral Murder: Before and After

I have chosen the *Collateral Murder* video precisely because it is an artifact that has resonated with viewers and become an iconic WikiLeaks product. Of course, WikiLeaks has been the genesis of a broad range of stories over the years: illegal waste dumping in the Ivory Coast (WikiLeaks, 2009); price fixing of medicine in developing nations (WikiLeaks, 2008b); money laundering by Swiss banks (WikiLeaks, 2008a); and the famous war documents from Iraq and Afghanistan (WikiLeaks, 2010b, 2010c). Although it would be an exercise in futility to attempt to gauge which of these leaks has had the greatest impact, it is fair to say that the *Collateral Murder* video is one of the best known and most widely recognized results of the ongoing WikiLeaks project. This, I would argue, is because—unlike the hundreds of thousands of pages of material released by WikiLeaks—*Collateral Murder* is visual evidence of the gross abuse of state and military power. It is this visuality that touched so many nerves: One can read endless accounts of and reports on the brutality of war, yet few combinations of words can generate the feeling one gets from watching a human get shot with high-powered helicopter cannon fire while lying injured and defenseless on the ground. These particular images were, in many ways, the crystallization of the horrors of war.

The first few weeks after the release of *Collateral Murder*, in conjunction with the Iraq and Afghanistan war logs, reflected the power of these images. In 2011, I wrote an article for *Le Monde Diplomatique* (Christensen, 2011c) in which I argued that the period shortly after the release of the *Collateral Murder* video and Afghanistan/Iraq war logs demonstrated the potential impact of WikiLeaks mainstream media collaboration. I described this as,

a rare and exciting (albeit short) period of political, professional and cultural introspection, particularly in the United States. U.S. foreign policy and military spending, civilian deaths and possible war crimes in Iraq, journalistic under-performance after 9/11, and government transparency were all thrust into the open as topics for consideration. (Christensen, 2011c, para. 6)

This was not revolution, of course. Most people in the United States and United Kingdom do not read *The New York Times* or *The Guardian*, and it would be an exercise in romanticism to argue that the publication of the leaks related to Iraq and Afghanistan would lead to any immediate, substantial political change. Yet, as I asserted, to argue this would be to miss the point. The leaks prompted “a radical critique of U.S. military and geo-political power into mainstream popular discourse (particularly in the U.S.),” and the very presence of this critique “opened up the possibility that the murky world of US power might now be forced to concede ground to transparency advocates” (Christensen, 2011c, para. 7).

Since 2010, however, the relationship between WikiLeaks and news outlets turned sour (Christensen, 2011d). But the broken relationship between WikiLeaks and the mainstream news media does not change the fact that it marked a shift in how activist organizations might collaborate with their mainstream counterparts to the benefit of citizens. And the impact of the *Collateral Murder* video has extended well beyond the initial period of leak and release. To consider what I call the “afterlife” of this video, I divide my discussion into three areas: the film itself, the act of leaking and release, and, finally, the various geopolitical events over the past four years that have reintroduced this leaked film into the public consciousness.

Memorializing a Crime

The film itself is, as discussed earlier, from the gun sight of a U.S. Apache attack helicopter. The footage is reminiscent of the aerial imagery that emerged from the first Gulf War in the early 1990s (the “Nintendo War”). This aerial footage has been updated in recent years with the development and use of drone technology for the identification and killing of individuals from unmanned military aircraft (see Adey, Whitehead, & Williams, 2011; Gregory, 2011). One could argue that the repeated use of this imagery (and corresponding audio) has created an entirely new genre of military reporting. It is a genre with specific, often disturbing conventions: grainy images of those on the ground; flat, bland coloring; “narration” of the aircraft operators, which swings between the clinical and the cynical; the silence of those under surveillance or attack; the sound of the weaponry as it is discharged; and, importantly, the “overtness” of the technology, by which I mean the way in which the screen is filled with evidence of the technology being used in the form of the crosshairs in the middle and data visible at the top and bottom of the screen.

It is not my intention to offer a deep analysis of the content of the video. My interest is more in the ways in which the leak and release of the video have been linked to a wide variety of events since 2010. I would argue that what makes videos such as *Collateral Murder* so powerful is the overt imbalance of power between filmer and filmed. This may seem like an obvious point—these are, after all, humans

being shot by cannon fire as they lay injured on the ground—but the power imbalance is heightened by the overtness of the technology, the silence of those on the ground, the graininess of the imagery, and the pilots' clinical and cynical narrative. Many of these traits resemble those found in videos uploaded to YouTube by U.S. soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan (Christensen, 2008). By virtue of this form, the dominant popular understanding of warfare is subverted and challenged. This is an understanding that has been repeated for millennia: War is marked by bravery, heroism, combat (often at close quarters), and, even in moments of extreme violence, by rules of "conduct" and "engagement" that separate the battle from indiscriminate mass slaughter. As U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld put it in 2003 in relation to the bombing of targets in Iraq:

Every single target has been analyzed, and the weapon has been carefully selected and the direction in which the weapon is delivered has been carefully examined, and the time of day when there is greatest prospect of minimizing any innocent lives. It is an enormously impressive effort, a humane effort. (U.S. Department of Defense, 2003, para. 30)

Rumsfeld's discourse, while easy to ridicule, links neatly to a great deal of techno-utopianism from both inside and outside the military world. In other words: technology in the service of humanity. The *Collateral Murder* video not only shatters the mythology of humane warfare and benevolent U.S. power but causes us to question the notion of neutral technology at the service of human development—a theme that has regained a central space in public debate in recent years (see Christensen, 2011a; Diamond, 2010;). As a final comment on the content of the video, one of the central elements of the video's impact was the fact that two of the victims were journalists working for Reuters. Thus, the U.S. attack was not only on men and children in New Baghdad but upon the practice of journalism itself, and the impact of the video would likely have been far less had these two men not been killed.

Production and Release as Dissent

In addition to content, what makes *Collateral Murder* such a powerful vehicle for the questioning of authority is the manner in which the video was obtained and released. Of course, many iconic images serve as clarion calls for antiwar and antiauthoritarian movements: from the disturbing footage of Neda Agha-Soltan slowly losing her life on the streets of Tehran, to a lone protester defying a line of tanks in Tiananmen Square, to the young, naked Vietnamese girl Kim Phuk, running along a dirt road, her body burned by a U.S. napalm attack. I do not wish to place *Collateral Murder* in any kind of competition with these images. They are all context bound and have particular political resonance, but what makes the WikiLeaks clip so compelling—and also a fascinating object of study—is how not only the *content* of the video challenged U.S. authority but how the *obtaining* and *release* of the video were equally threatening to U.S. power. This was not footage shot by a journalist working for CNN or a bystander on her phone. This was classified material, part of the largest leak in history for which the source, Chelsea (then Bradley) Manning, was sentenced to 35 years in prison. Thus, as we now all know, *Collateral Murder* was but one component of an enormous act of whistle-blowing. The power of the content of *Collateral Murder* is enhanced via the knowledge that what one is seeing is the result of deliberate acts of dissent: both from Manning in the form of the leak and from WikiLeaks in the decryption and release of the video. Even a

cursory examination of the volume of legal research conducted in relation to WikiLeaks' leaks (e.g., Benkler, 2012; Cannon, 2013; Davidson, 2011; Fenster, 2012; Peters, 2011; Rothe & Steinmetz, 2013; Wells, 2012) indicates how far-reaching these activities have been in their relation to journalism, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and government transparency.

Manning's act, and the visual evidence supplied, went beyond blowing the whistle on a potential war crime. Manning, WikiLeaks, and *Collateral Murder* exposed the arrogance of unilateral power, a disdain for human life, a clear and systematic opposition to transparency, and the undermining of democracy through the elimination of citizen participation and knowledge. But Manning and WikiLeaks revealed even more. They blew the whistle on failed post-9/11 journalism, particularly in the United States (Christensen, 2013b). The fact that two Reuters staff were victims in the film served as a reminder to viewers about the function of news reporting in war: to see the horrors of what happens in armed conflict, and to do so not only from the perspective of one's own country but from the opponent's perspective.

The participation in armed conflict, and the use of military force, is one of the ultimate exercises in power in which a state can engage; and, thus, a critical examination of that use of power (on behalf of the citizenry) is one of the ultimate responsibilities of a functioning system of journalism. Academic research since 9/11 has illustrated the extent to which U.S. journalism was not only generally uncritical with regard to U.S. post-9/11 geopolitics but was actually complicit in stoking the fires of war through an unquestioning position vis-à-vis weapons of mass destruction as well as a disturbing willingness to play the nationalism card in both the direct aftermath of 9/11 as well as the early stages of the occupation of Iraq. Within this context, the killing of two Reuters employees by the U.S. military was particularly poignant. At the most basic level, this was the symbolic killing of Journalism (with a capital J) by a military unaccustomed to critical coverage or investigation at home. The killings, of course, then went unreported until Manning leaked the material and WikiLeaks published it—itself an act of journalism. With *Collateral Murder*, there is a layering and relayering of meaning, and journalism lies at the heart of the clip. These are humans first, of course, and most of those killed or wounded in the attack were not journalists. But in addition to the tragedy of human death is the tragedy of what is symbolically destroyed: transparency, democracy, knowledge, and critical thinking. And it took an act of journalism to bring these tragedies to light—an act that has now itself been subjected to the full force of the state via the imprisonment of Manning and the threat of criminal charges being brought against Assange in the United States.

Conclusion: The Importance of *Collateral Murder*

And this is where I would like to conclude: the ways in which *Collateral Murder*—as a symbolic vehicle in relation to democracy, journalism, transparency, and state power—has maintained relevance over the past four years. This relates to the concept of the ephemerality and afterlife as discussed by Christensen and Christensen (2008). Within this concept, certain events and artifacts allow for the opening and reopening of spaces for debate and discussion over extended periods of time. In the case of *Collateral Murder*, the video was released once, but it entered and reentered public consciousness as it was connected to a series of events over the past four years. Naturally, the trial of Chelsea Manning and the ongoing media coverage of Julian Assange and WikiLeaks are steady factors in the video maintaining

popular currency. During Manning's trial and sentencing—events, I should note, that received relatively little media coverage in the United States given the volume of Manning's material used by news outlets—the video was perhaps one of the central pieces of visual evidence underpinning Chelsea Manning's contention that she was acting out of a desire to expose U.S. abuses of power rather than an attempt to undermine the United States driven by anti-American sentiment.

In much the same way, WikiLeaks is intrinsically linked to the video. As the organization has seen threats from the U.S. government, a cutting off of financial resources due to a corporate blockade (itself the result of threats from the U.S. government), and the current legal problems facing founder Julian Assange, *Collateral Murder* has been referenced and re-referenced as evidence of WikiLeaks' importance. Again, this is not to suggest that the other material leaked by WikiLeaks, or the copious volume of written material it has released, are any less important or vital, but rather that this short film has established itself as an organizational touchstone in the minds of many. Following Manning's conviction and sentencing, there emerged a new whistle-blower: Edward Snowden. With the explosion of material released by Snowden to former *Guardian* journalist Glenn Greenwald there evolved substantial popular debates on technology, the use and abuse of state power, and journalism (and, in many cases, a combination of these areas). Snowden and Manning were often linked under the whistle-blower title, and Snowden's revelations about the abuse of U.S. power through mass surveillance via high technology have fed into much of the discourse on violence and technology.

In the media in general, and among social media users in particular, Edward Snowden, Chelsea Manning, WikiLeaks, Anonymous, Assange, Barrett Brown, and Aaron Swartz are discussed as a general collection of individuals and groups with a common goal. What is interesting about these people is that they have all seen their actions criminalized: in the case of Manning, Brown, and Swartz, in real terms (Christensen, 2013a), and in the case of Snowden and Assange (Pilkington, 2011), in terms of potential prosecution. In these discussions, the *Collateral Murder* video emerges and reemerges as one component of a larger body of material exposing abuses of U.S. power. The release of this video, as with the release of the National Security Agency documents from Snowden, was met by the state with threats of wildly excessive prison terms. As I wrote:

The irony is, were Manning a Chinese, Iranian or Cuban soldier who had exposed potential war crimes committed by his government, his solitary confinement and impending life sentence would be held up as evidence of the barbarity and anti-democratic tendencies of the "regimes" in question, and calls would be made for his release on "humanitarian" grounds. As it is, Chelsea Manning was handed a wildly excessive prison sentence, at odds with both logic and law, for the purpose of crushing the individual in question. (Christensen, 2013a, para. 5)

Within this punitive logic of the state, it is the act of releasing the material—the video, the documents, the link—which is the crime. What is actually *contained* within the video, the document, or the link is dismissed as secondary, or within the rights of the security state. And this is how *Collateral Murder* continues to maintain relevance and capital: Although it is snapshot of a place in time, it is also a recording of a crime. In this way, the content is universal and timeless. Yet because its very existence is

the product of multiple acts of dissent—dissent which is criminalized—the video, Manning, and WikiLeaks find themselves as part of a much broader discussion about journalism, technology, transparency, justice, and democracy: areas at the heart of academic study.

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