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WikiLeaks, the New Information Cultures, and Digital Parrhesia

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WikiLeaks (currently at <http://213.251.145.96/>) has redefined not only media ethics it has redefined what we understand as information cultures itself. This commentary on perhaps one of the most significant developments since the arrival of internet cultures outlines certain ways of

understanding WikiLeaks (WL, for short).¹ I shall do this through a series of propositions, given that we have no idea yet how WL will shape up, and so the present commentary also has to be partial, fragmentary and unfinished.

WL as a Cultural Phenomenon

WL cannot be identified just with an individual Julian Assange, even though he pops up as soon as one opens the website. Assange is a messenger, he is neither messiah nor the message. But, fortunately or unfortunately, he has become identified as the ‘face’ of WL. However, to do this is to personalize-individualise what is really a *cultural* phenomenon.² It draws breath from the subcultural hacker movement which arose primarily out of the belief (now the hacker credo): ‘information wants to be free’. Years ago the Cult of the Dead Cow (CDC) delivered its

Hactivist Declaration:

We view access to information as a basic human right. We are also interested in keeping the Internet free of state-sponsored censorship and corporate chicanery so all opinions can be heard. (http://www.cultdeadcow.com/cDc_files/HacktivismoFAQ.html).

¹ In terms of US interests in other parts of the world, WL released an internal memo, 09STATE15113 clearly labeled NONFORN (not to be shared with any foreigners, not even US allies). The cable/memo lists sites around the world. These were categorised as ‘critical foreign dependencies (critical infrastructure and key resources located abroad)’, dated 18 February 2009 by the office of the Secretary of State. Three locations in India find mention on this list: chromite mines in Orissa and Karnataka and Generamedix Gujrat [sic], India, a pharma company described in the cable as ‘Chemotherapy agents, including florouracil and methotrexate’. (<http://wikileaks.ch/cable/2009/02/09STATE15113.html>).

² Peter Ludlow in fact draws attention to the hactivist roots of WL (2010. For a sustained discussion of hacker subculture see Thomas 2002) thus categorizing WL as a manifestation of a movement that has been around for quite a while.

This Declaration itself drew upon the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), quoting its Article 19: ‘Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers’. Like CDC, WL also sees itself as deriving its moral and ethical stance from the UDHR (citing article 19 on its website), and thus locates itself in a *global cultural apparatus*: the *universal* movement for Human and related Rights. What WL represents is a new culture of information that dovetails into two other *cultural* practices: whistleblowing and *parrhesia* (truth-telling). At the end of this essay I shall return to the second one for a more extensive discussion.

Despite this emphasis on the *culture* of dissidence, resistance and truth-telling embodied by WL, it cannot be denied that *individual* whistleblowers have put their careers and their lives on the line. For protest to effect any political change, cyborg theorist Chris Hables Gray, the creator of the Cyborg Bill of Rights points out, it requires embodiment: ‘you testify to the truth with your body’ (2001: 44). The persecution of Assange – his dramatic arrest, the rape charges, the threats of extradition and possible assassination – makes for a very strange mix where the virtual meets the flesh-and-blood: online activity whose validity and value are sworn to by the very real threat to the *person* of Julian Assange. Conversely, does eliminating the ‘body’ of Assange alter the virtual threat that the new culture of information represents? The answer is ‘no’, for we are in the age of an electronic civil society and information culture unlimited to bodies, geographies or national boundaries.

WL as Public Witnessing

WL shapes a new textualisation and visualization of *how* international relations and global geopolitics work. That is, something as abstract as geopolitics or international relations that very often manifest only as finalised treaties or speeches or policy documents gets broken down into its dirty, messy constituent parts. We therefore must see WL's collection of documents as the *processes* that make up the world's functioning. In a sense, WL directs us, for the first time, to the *making* of the world order (or disorder).

WL emerges out of digital and networked technologies that enable 'public witnessing' (Reading 2009). Here the production of information about Human Rights violations, war, oppression, atrocity, disaster and suffering have been the work not solely of CNN and the state but amateurs wielding mobile phone cameras and camcorders. Traceable back to the epoch-making Rodney King beating, public witnessing is the user-generated content of the horrors of war or disaster. In such a context WL feeds an already ravenous appetite for such content. In an era where extreme cultures constitute the screen in the form of extreme sports, extreme deprivation and extreme violence, WL is one more component of such cultures. Thus to see WL as completely unique would be to deny significance to the visual cultures of Abu Ghraib-Guantanamo Bay, Katrina, the Tsunami or the Haitian earthquake.

Public witnessing ensures that the invisible becomes visible as well. For example, WL's first major exposes were of the Iraq war, many visuals being uploaded (and later acquired by WL) by soldiers from the front. As Noel Whitty suggests in his study of soldier photography (2010), a whole new 'visualization of war' is now possible with such visuals. Those scenes we

were not meant to see – which is what Nicholas Mirzoeff terms ‘invisible’ () – such as Saddam Hussein’s execution, the tortures in Abu Ghraib or the massacre of civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan can now be seen. We are now in the era of the hyper-visible, by which I mean the excessive and repeated circulation of such images we were not intended to ever see.

In the age of Human Rights campaigns, a great deal of value is attached to the visual evidence of atrocity (Girling 2004). That is, there is a *visual culture of Human Rights* today, a cultural apparatus through which human rights is refracted for public consumption. The Iraq War Logs and the ‘Collateral Murder’ video which first brought WL global attention are instances of this visual culture of Human Rights and international humanitarian law. Scenes of war, classified documents that legitimised torture, secret parleys behind policy constitute what we might term a counter-archive. An archive has traditionally been a space where documents are stored and the rights of interpretation of these documents rest with a chosen few (known in classical times as ‘archons’). Here, in WL’s archives we have a database from which we, as readers, need to build narratives. I am drawing attention to two specific details here. The collection of documents might have an ‘internal’ narrative but we need to see them as a database. A database in cyberspace leaves us many options of traversals (reading, following links). As we traverse we build a narrative through the database. I have elsewhere argued that this construction of narrative from a ‘raw’ database is fundamentally a matter of *choice*: what paths we choose to take through the database (Nayar 2010). Therefore, the archive of documents WL leaks must be, and can be, *made to tell a story* – about injustice, corruption, deprivation, suffering in *any* part of the world – depending on our choice of frames of interpretation and wanderings through the corpus. WL-

facilitated public witnessing could therefore become the means of producing a globalization of conscience.

WL, Knowledge-making and Virtual Public Space

WL constitutes a rupture in dominant and dominating patterns of knowledge-making and interpretive schemes. Previously knowledge that was hierarchic, centralised and graded, is now random, non-hierarchic and user-generated resulting in distributed knowledge (or ‘infotopia’, Sunstein 2006; Lévy 2001, chapter Ten).

WL’s leakage of thousands of documents offers contestatory narratives of the ‘war on terror’, to take just one instance. These contestatory narratives provide the necessary corrective to centralised and controlled state discourses about Iraq and Afghanistan. With WL a gap in knowledge about the same event has occurred: between the rhetoric of the American government regarding the ‘war on terror’ and the stories told in the leaked cables. This gap in knowledge cannot be really filled because of the contestatory nature of the counter-archive. If knowledge proceeds by debates, in the true Socratic function, WL offers us an opportunity to situate two discourses and sets of narratives in dialogue.

What WL does is not to pinpoint blames for wrong-doing on X or Y. Rather, it gives us a glimpse of the institutional, state, organizational *cultures* that made X or Y’s acts possible. Records on/at WL must be seen not as individual instances but as embodiments of institutional politics and power games. In other words, we need to treat the documents in the archive not as illuminating the perversions of one soldier in Iraq or Abu Ghraib: they must be evaluated as

synecdochic of a culture where such acts of atrocity were made possible, and even legitimised. It is therefore interesting to note how former soldiers who fought in Iraq *support* WL's efforts. 'We did unto you what we would not want done unto us ... Our heavy hearts still hold hope that we can restore in our country the acknowledgement of your humanity, that we were taught to deny' (quoted in Lazare and Harvey 2010: 27). What WL does is to locate a Lynndie England (the infamous prison warden at Abu Ghraib) within an American culture of war and a war effort that empowered such individuals. The individual soldiers only denote individual wrong-doing, but what we need to see is the connotation – which is the cultural apparatus of atrocity.

Individuals like Bradley Manning (the Military Intelligence analyst who allegedly leaked the documents to WL, and is now in prison, and likely to remain there for a long time), see their acts as a public service. Thus, to bring the argument full circle, to see Assange or Manning as individual heroes is to miss the point. If the public space has to possess a certain morality – of giving visibility to human rights violations, deprivation, suffering and cruelty (i.e., whistleblowing) and offering the chance for people to voice their dissent and discontent – then it is the rise and dissemination of counter-narratives such as those archived at WL that re-make the space. If public space is the space for different people to tell their stories WL marks the arrival of such a space (we shall return to the nature and function of this electronic space in the last section). This is the main reason why it is fascinating to see how the USA, the so-called defender of free speech and therefore multiple stories, has suddenly decided that WL is not about free speech at all because it hurts 'global' interests (US commentators have even called for the death penalty to Bradley Manning). In January 2009 US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton

claimed a new nervous system for the globe: the internet. Sharply critical just last year of China's efforts at limiting Google (known among hactivists as 'the great firewall of China'), this same Clinton is now up in arms against WL.

WL and the Archive of the Future

Hactivism such as WL's is always open to charges of being unethical, especially when their disclosures affect powerful state and corporate interests. However, we need to see their ethics as 'deriving from the future', as Tim Jordan argues about hactivists (2002: 138). WL cannot really predict what its disclosures will result in. In this sense, WL is not embedded either in the past or the present: it draws its courage from a *promise of a future when things could be different*. But it can also be read as a moral/ethical position on free speech – a position and policy endorsed by various governments in the past – being taken to its logical end and directed at the future.

The entire WL project must be seen as an archive whose uses would only be in the future, it is therefore a responsibility and response directed at the future of knowledge-production, international relations and authority. Currently, as it stands, the 250, 000+ documents WL plans to release slowly is in fact 'virtual': for the word virtual means 'something with the potential to become real'. This archive has the potential – the future – to remake the world through the rise of a global consciousness.

WL and the Culture of Parrhesia

To return to the point with which I began, the cultures of information, WL can be read as marking the arrival of a digital parrhesia, or truth-telling. Derived from ‘para’ meaning ‘beyond’ and ‘resis’, meaning ‘speech’, parrhesia is truth-telling performed at risk to the truth-teller.³ In Athenian democracy, parrhesia was an important component, but it was also a feature that distinguished the good citizen, Michel Foucault notes (1983). It involves citizens acting as individuals, but also acting as an assembly in the open space: ‘Parrhesia, which is a requisite for public speech, takes place between citizens as individuals, and also between citizens construed as an assembly. Moreover, the agora [the open space] is the place where parrhesia appears’ (Foucault, online, unpaginated).

Two preliminary points. First, it is not possible, given the nature of global communications and the globalisation of free speech, to think of a single truth-teller, unless one were to, mistakenly, in my opinion, assign this status to Assange. But, as noted earlier, we must be careful in converting the messenger into a messiah or even the message itself. The most one can say about Assange is that he functions as a cipher in the free flow of information that is digital parrhesia. While accusations about his autocratic and anti-US bias do the rounds, it remains indisputable that the documents speak for themselves, in the medium which is cyberspace and WL. A second point to be noted is that parrhesia is performed at the risk to the truth-teller. Here, if we assume the speech-act as a manifestation of the structures enabling transmission of truth, then Assange and Bradley Manning are indeed the structures at risk.

³ It is here that parrhesia differs from whistleblowing: where whistleblowing is often protected by law, parrhesia is not, and the truth-teller is unprotected.

These seem to be two apparently contradictory points – about digital parrhesia being performed at risk to the truth-teller and contemporary condition where we cannot pinpoint a *single* truth-teller. I propose a slightly different parrhesia, one that is less interested in the truth-teller than in the *culture of truth-telling*. Digital cultures create a new *communications* culture, which generates a new *community*, the global civil society (we have seen this in the case of online supports, campaigns, humanitarian efforts in the wake of the tsunami, Katrina, the Haiti earthquake, protests against the WTO, etc), and the globalisation of conscience. WL is an embodiment of this new form of communications-leading-to-community, a digital parrhesia. At risk is digital space as parrhesiastic space. At risk is a new media cultural practice (Napster, Bit Torrent, Rapidshare, Creative Commons, Open Source Movement, Wikipedia, WikiLeaks), *not* the individual voice. At risk is the entire culture of information sharing, the agora of information.

Parrhesia has a close link with self-examination (Foucault). Foucault of course makes much of the fact that a truth-teller's telling and his life must be in what he calls 'harmonic relation'. Thus, it calls upon the speaker to examine what s/he believes and therefore for a closer scrutiny of her/him-self. Hence the attacks on Assange's personal life are aimed at discrediting his *role* as truth-teller, but miss the crucial point of the contexts of parrhesia. By targeting him, the governments are hoping to change the cultural form itself. His morality in fact has nothing to do with the culture of communications. What the contemporary version of parrhesia achieves is not only the demand for self-examination (American policies, for example, as revealed in the cables) but a context in which this examination can occur. This brings us to the next point.

Foucault notes that the ‘agora is the place where parrhesia appears’. The agora, central to ancient democracies, is the public space where multiple stories are told, at considerable risk to the teller (and heard). For some time now cyberspace has been treated as an agora (Rheingold 1993). It is in the continuous, often random movement of data packets that parrhesia makes its appearance in the agora of virtual worlds, the information commons. Digital parrhesia is the process of building a global civil space, an electronic agora through the social act of sharing information and producing collaborative/distributed knowledge – and this is what is at stake in the WL battle. If information and rational debate are central to the democratisation of the world (democracy is often ‘deliberative democracy’, with an inherent emphasis on information-driven ‘deliberations’), then the digital parrhesia is the space of deliberation where democracy *might* emerge.

Truth-telling might of course result in the severance of relations between the truth-teller and his audience (try telling your friend you do not like her/his partner!), but that still means he must speak the truth. Foucault makes it clear that his intention ‘was not to deal with the problem of truth, but with the problem of the truth-teller or truth-telling as an activity’. The questions he raises about truth-telling as activity are what concern us most today in the case of WL: ‘what is the relation between the activity of truth-telling and the exercise of power, or should these activities be completely independent and kept separate?’ We should be concerned, says Foucault, ‘with the question of the importance of telling the truth, knowing who is able to tell the truth, and knowing why we should tell the truth’. The task at hand is to create the agora where parrhesia *can* take place. It is not necessarily the validity of this or that statement, cable or memo, but the

space in which these can be displayed and kept for scrutiny as part of a trust-building exercise. It is therefore important that space be made for parrhesia to take place. This means, simply, keeping the agora, the space of the virtual and WL domains open for parrhesiastic ‘business’ (something that has been directly affected through the withdrawal of support by Amazon.com, PayPal, and Visa-Mastercard⁴).

Michael Peters has, I think correctly, proposed that parrhesia is connected not only to knowledge but to education and thence to democracy (2003). While Foucault’s interest lay in the education of the self and the institution of monarchy with which parrhesia was most situated it is possible to extend this ideas to contemporary times. Parrhesia is ‘fearless speech’ and is a crucial component of the civic processes of any society. It is usually performed by an individual who is in a position of lesser power. Parrhesia also aligns truth with duty and the necessity to improve conditions through the truth-telling act (Sementelli 2009: 360). Put together what we can argue is that WL constitutes a parrhesiastic act that (i) must be allowed to run free (ii) must be facilitated by the construction and reinforcement of conditions in which it can happen and (iii) enables the making of a global civil society. As of now, admittedly, the USA has been the major target of the leaks. But if WL’s own statements are true, then it appears as though several countries and governments around the world will have their hidden stories ‘outed’. If there is any chance of a global civil society, an agora, to form, then WL’s digital parrhesia might just be the route to that

⁴ Shyam Ranganathan correctly points out that what is disturbing is the ‘extent to which many parts of the democratic system seem to have acquiesced in the process of manufacturing consent that has been undertaken by the political system’ (2010: 12).

place where criticism of governments from the USA to Ulan Bator can occur. Digital parrhesia is very possibly the domain where democracy itself is at stake.

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