WikiLeaks

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Abstract

This entry addresses the emergence as well as the demise of WikiLeaks as an innovative platform for whistleblowers to leak documents and evidence of wrongdoing. The entry starts by defining the practice of whistleblowing and addressing the digital affordances which led to the emergence and initial success of WikiLeaks. It also deals with the problems raised by releasing an abundance of information. This led WikiLeaks to turn to media partners to increase the impact of the leaked information they received. The leaking of US classified information was not without consequences and led to a counterattack by the US government and by US-based companies on which WikiLeaks relied for funding and hosting of its content. State and corporate repression in combination with the increasing personality cult surrounding Julian Assange, and the allegations of sexual misconduct against him, have led to the gradual demise of WikiLeaks. Its last high-profile leak were the emails from the Clinton campaign and the Democratic party during the 2016 US elections.

Keywords: *activism; information overload; journalism; whistleblowing, WikiLeaks*

The practice of whistleblowing has a long history; some even trace it back to the medieval principle of *qui tam*, whereby a private individual could receive part of a fine if they exposed fraud or false claims to the king. Whistleblowing today is defined as the reporting or disclosure of wrongdoing, corruption, fraud, or unethical behavior occurring inside an organization by someone who works or is active within that organization. There is discussion about this, but for this disclosure to be whistleblowing it needs to occur toward an external actor or a third party, using unconventional channels of communication (Jubb, 1999). Whistleblowing thus also represents a deliberate act of dissent and is usually preceded by internal disclosures which did not yield the desired result.

The whistleblower is, however, highly vulnerable and tends to be victimized and accused of disloyalty toward the organization or individuals in positions of authority that they accuse, leading to the so-called "shoot the messenger" syndrome. As Martin (1999: 19) explains, "instead of their message being evaluated, the full power of the organization is turned against the whistleblower." This tendency also explains why whistleblowers value secrecy and anonymity (Elliston, 1982). Some famous historical cases of whistleblowing include the leaking of the Pentagon Papers related to the Vietnam War and the revelations of Deep Throat in the context of Watergate, leading to the resignation of US president Richard Nixon, but we can also identify many less high-profile cases linked to wrongdoings in companies or public institutions.

In many ways, the emergence of WikiLeaks represented a new and exciting chapter in this rich history of whistleblowing as a dissident practice. In October 2006, Julian Assange, an Australian hacker known by the name Mendax, registered the domain name of WikiLeaks and a few months later the first document was published – it concerned a decree signed by Sheikh Hassan Dahir Aweys, a Somali Islamist rebel, to hire criminals in order to execute Somali government officials. The authenticity of this document was never established but its publication did put WikiLeaks on the map as a platform through which incriminating documents could be published securely. WikiLeaks' first big scoop was the publication in November 2007 of the Guantánamo Bay military manual entitled *Camp Delta Standard Operating Procedures*, which detailed procedures at the US controlled detention center on Cuba. By 2008, WikiLeaks had gained worldwide notoriety

and respectability within the hacking community, which resulted in more and more whistleblowers using the site to reveal sensitive documents such as those incriminating the Swiss bank Julius Bär with regard to tax evasion and money laundering, the "secret" Scientology handbooks, private e-mails from Sarah Palin, or the membership list of the neofascist British National Party (BNP). Other high-profile leaks included the "Collateral Murder" video (April 2010) showing an attack by a US Apache helicopter on a group of unarmed men in Baghdad, among them two Reuters journalists; the Afghan war diaries and the Iraq war logs (respectively July and October 2010); and the US diplomatic cables or Cablegate (November 2010). See Domscheit-Berg (2011) for an exhaustive overview of leaks.

Digital Opportunities

These successes can in large part be explained by a set of digital opportunities and affordances which befitted the needs of whistleblowers. As Fenster (2011: 7) asserts, WikiLeaks can be approached as "a technologically sophisticated service capable of distributing purloined data anonymously and publicizing its release." Through the implementation of complex encryptions and anonymizing procedures, whistleblowers were assured that they left "no traces on the Web, not even the smallest fingerprint or data fragment. Nothing," as WikiLeaks collaborator Daniel Domscheit-Berg (2011: 37) put it. Furthermore, given WikiLeaks' increased notoriety, leaked data and documents tended to receive high levels of publicity, which also represented a key affordance for a potential whistleblower.

Besides the affordances of WikiLeaks as a digital platform protecting the identity of whistleblowers as well as high levels of exposure for the content they leaked, the shift from a paper to a digital culture propelled by an e-government discourse propagating efficiency and cost savings also created a distinct opportunity, namely "to reveal information that was not intended for distribution outside certain vetted channels" (Sterner, 2011: 5). As the example of the Pentagon Papers attests, the leaking of secrets and sensitive documents is not a new phenomenon, but the scale at which it occurs today is quite unprecedented. Senior BBC journalist John Humphrys (2011: n.p.) referred to this in the context of WikiLeaks, when he stated that "in the new era of e-government – government by email … huge quantities of secret government information can be leaked at the press of a button." However, this abundance of information also creates its own problems.

Information Overload

In November 2009 about half a million text messages relating to 9/11 were leaked. They provided a detailed account of the sheer panic, fear, and chaos that was prevalent that day. In the course of publishing these messages, WikiLeaks discovered that a wealth of information did not necessarily always yield much publicity. In fact, they had also run out of money and it was decided to shut down WikiLeaks on December 23, 2009 as a kind of signal to the world and to garner (financial) support (see Domscheit-Berg, 2011: 104).

When they went back online a month later (January 2010), an important lesson had been learned. For the Afghan War Diaries – 91.000 documents from US Central Command – WikiLeaks decided to change tactic and involve selected media outlets from the very outset (see Leigh and Harding, 2011). As Assange (2010a: n.p.) pointed out, after the Afghan Diaries were released, "the more important and the bigger the leak is, the less chance it has of being reported if it is being distributed to everyone at once," hence the decision to involve *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *Der Spiegel* and provide them exclusive access to the material. This was expanded to Al Jazeera and UK's Channel 4 for the Iraq War Diaries and to *El País* and *Le Monde* for the US

diplomatic cables. In an opinion piece published in an Australian newspaper, Assange called this tactic "scientific journalism":

> We work with other media outlets to bring people the news, but also to prove it is true. Scientific journalism allows you to read a news story, then to click online to see the original document it is based on. That way you can judge for yourself: Is the story true? Did the journalist report it accurately? (2010b: n.p.)

However, even with the active involvement of journalists and global media organizations the abundance of information posed a considerable problem. Very quickly after the publication of the Afghan war diaries it became apparent to WikiLeaks activists that the main story and public debate shifted very rapidly from the actual content to the possible harm the disclosures had caused (Domscheit-Berg, 2011: 152–153). Furthermore, the exclusivity granted to a select number of publications and the commercial interests of these media outlets, allegations of payments being made for access to the content, and considerable redactions of the disclosed content, made WikiLeaks move away from its idealistic position to make all information it receives publicly available and accessible to all, which in turn led to increased internal tensions within WikiLeaks.

A potent example of this was Cablegate – 250.000 confidential communiqués between the US State Department and 274 embassies worldwide. Some 15,000 of these cables were classified as secret, but only a few hundred of these sensitive cables were made public. As Domscheit-Berg (2011: 206) pointed out, "only WikiLeaks's five exclusive media partners had access to the truly controversial details." He, as well as others within the organization, argued that this went against all that WikiLeaks stood for. Furthermore, by involving mainstream media actors so closely, WikiLeaks also lost control of the sensitive data it possessed and ceased to be a neutral intermediary facilitating the publication of documents leaked by whistleblowers.

Repression and Demise

With the publication of the Collateral Murder video, the Afghanistan and Iraq war logs, and the US diplomatic cables, as well as the arrest on May 26, 2010 of US private Bradley Manning, who was suspected of having leaked all this classified material, the efforts to attack and discredit WikiLeaks as an organization and Julian Assange as its public face were stepped up considerably. The US Justice Department started investigating whether Assange could be personally indicted with violating the 1917 US Espionage Act. On Facebook, former governor of Alaska Sarah Palin called for Assange "to be hunted down like Osama bin Laden." Several WikiLeaks collaborators residing in or visiting the US were detained and questioned. But matters were to become much worse when Assange, and thus also WikiLeaks, had to address accusations of sexual misconduct in Sweden, which led to an international arrest warrant being issued against Assange (Leigh *et al.*, 2010). The immense pressure on Assange and on WikiLeaks as an organization ultimately led to a split at the core of the organization, as distrust amongst the core members grew and long-term conflicts boiled over. The coverage of the rape allegations also led to severe conflicts between Assange and his many media partners (see Leigh and Harding, 2011).

In addition to this, both the physical hosting of the actual content and the linkage between Internet protocol address and the domain names of WikiLeaks were targeted. US senator Joe Lieberman urged US companies, naming Amazon in particular, to sever their links with WikiLeaks and Assange (Poulsen, 2010). On December 2, 2010, four days after publishing the US diplomatic cables, Amazon terminated its contract with WikiLeaks, claiming that WikiLeaks had breached their "terms of service." On the same day, the US-based domain name provider EveryDNS Inc. also suspended their service to WikiLeaks. Besides the efforts to close down access to the WikiLeaks website, its financing was also targeted; in quick succession PayPal, Moneybookers, Visa,

MasterCard, BankAmerica, and the Swiss bank PostFinance closed, froze, or restricted the accounts of WikiLeaks. All this highlights the vulnerability of radical activists when relying too much on the corporate structures that rule the Internet and facilitate financial transactions online.

All of this, but especially the allegations against Assange of sexual misconduct in Sweden, which he feared could potentially lead to his extradition to the United States, led him to seek and receive political asylum in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London, where he was housed in a small room. Furthermore, WikiLeaks itself became more and more a one-man show and driven by vindication rather than the democratic and activist ideals it held dear at the outset. An example was WikiLeaks' active involvement in the Russian attempts to influence the 2016 US presidential elections and damage Hillary Clinton, who served as Secretary of State during the heyday of WikiLeaks (2009–2011). In April 2019, after having outstayed his welcome, Assange was arrested by UK authorities in the Ecuadorian embassy. In May 2019, he was sentenced to 50 weeks imprisonment for breaching the terms of his bail and he.is currently awaiting extradition to Sweden and/or the US (Quin, 2019).

The WikiLeaks case provides evidence of how the *mediation opportunity structure* (Cammaerts, 2012) facilitates whistleblowing as a form of information activism to resist strategies of secrecy and repression by state and corporate actors. At the same time this case also points to the ongoing turf war between states and corporations on the one hand and hackers on the other. It unfortunately also demonstrates how a cult of personality can be detrimental to the democratic goals of an activist organization.

SEE ALSO: Data Sharing Methods; Information Age; Whistleblowing

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