

# Government secrecy and the task of meta-journalists

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*'The real political task in a society such as ours is to criticise the workings of institutions that appear to be both neutral and independent, to criticise and attack them in such a manner that the political violence that has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them.'*

– *Michel Foucault, 'Human Nature: Justice Versus Power'*

In a debate with Noam Chomsky, social theorist Michel Foucault enounced the objective of modernity: to criticize unquestioned institutional norms in our society so that one can realise the power mechanisms beneath their neutral guise. Though Foucault referred to institutions such as hospitals and schools, government and companies are the first ones to appear as neutral today; they are widely understood as guaranteeing our safety and best interests. As such, they are the first that should come under scrutiny.

'Hacktivist' (a combination of hacker and activist) organisations, such as WikiLeaks and Anonymous, can be considered the emblem of what Foucault had envisioned. They are meta-journalists in the sense that they provide journalistic material to journalists. Though they claim not to have an ideological agenda, exposing truths has inevitable consequences on power; it unmaskes its apparatus and networks of control. Thus these organisations fall under a libertarian agenda that seeks to undermine our current predicament as subjects incapable of responding and participating in society.



Principles, as opposed to individuals, guide organisations like WikiLeaks and Anonymous. People working within them revolve around their mission to expose power abuses. Even the founder of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange, makes decisions committed to fulfilling this objective.

Conventional journalism, on the other hand, is predominantly guided by a political agenda, which is also what constrains it. Journalists aren't always willing to or capable of revealing information; it needs to be filtered by editors, laws on national security, and so forth. Hacktivists seek to undermine precisely this process by removing filters that strengthen the guise of power; justice is understood as freedom and truth is a necessary means to realise it.

**Did these organisations tell us anything new?**

Most people did not learn anything new. However, this does not imply the organisations did not accomplish their objective in exposing the truth. In many cases, rather than learning something new, they changed the way we perceived what we already knew.

WikiLeaks' leak of the video 'Collateral Murder', from former CIA agent Chelsea Manning, gave us a raw data example of the well-known reality of war.

Were we unaware that when countries engage in war they kill innocent civilians, even intentionally? Or that war is brutal and violent for civilians as well as for militants?



As Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek illustrates with an analogy – there's a difference between knowing that your husband/wife is cheating on you and seeing a photograph of the cheating itself taking place. In the latter case one is likely to react more strongly, suggesting that being aware of the truth does not suffice, it needs to be visualised for it to fulfil its purpose.

### **Constraints on freedom of information**

Freedom of information is not however absolute, even for organisations that seek government transparency. Julian Assange, founder of WikiLeaks, claimed WikiLeaks examines information prior to disclosure to guarantee it does not pose a threat to people's safety.

Thus WikiLeaks adopts a 'harm' filter to guide its revelations. This filter does not, however, belong to any political motives. It assumes a role of protection, albeit a very distinct one from the government and from conventional journalism. There is a difference between using secrecy to cover up abuses and using it to protect the public. Organisations that seek to reveal power misuse, such as WikiLeaks and Anonymous, do not expose secrets that would directly jeopardise national security. For example, they do not reveal the identities, military agents or strategies that would give the enemy a direct advantage in war efforts. They seek to expose illegitimate abuses of power that harm state security by causing reputational damages.

The government often characterises security as a need to retain information of abuse under the guise of defence. This characterisation has transformed into a public discourse, which has become normalised. Our task is to comprehend what national security really entails, by criticising the established and institutionalised norms of power that seek to define it for us.

***By Alessandra Bocchi***

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