

Should We Teach Journalism Students To Be More Like Julian Assange?

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Talking journalism education in Maryland

Imagine Julian Assange ran a journalism school.

Why not? He's created one of the world's biggest media brands on a tiny budget. It's produced some of the most extraordinary pieces of journalism in the digital era and he's worked with all the big names. If you judge journalism by how much the people in power hate you, then he scores A*.

I think we can all learn from WikiLeaks. That was my message to the hundreds of excellent journalism educators at the Merrill School [interactive journalism conference](#).

Of course, I have a selfish pecuniary motive. I want them all to put [my new book](#) on the significance of WikiLeaks on their reading lists for next semester.

But seriously, it is important that we think about why WikiLeaks was such a success (as well as thinking about its flaws and mistakes). This is partly because I think too many journalism educators are desperately seeking specific skills to teach that will slot them into the new roles being created in contemporary news rooms. I would rather they sought ways to promote a strategic vision, an aptitude for innovation and a passion for the purpose of journalism in their students. (Though the two approaches are complimentary rather than opposed).

So in that sense, we should understand that WikiLeaks worked because its founder had a great skill set – programming and hacking. But so do a lot of people. What made WikiLeaks work was Assange's ideological drive and his all-consuming desire to use digital communications as a political weapon. He spotted a new business model and a novel kind of platform.

He was then also very flexible and evolved the model into a networked project that collaborated with mainstream media partner with extraordinary results. The fact that he was a bit, how shall we put it, eccentric, doesn't really make him that different from many outstanding media pioneers. (I refer you to Zuckerberg, Jobs & Murdoch).

Now my point is not that you should teach journalism students to be Julian Assange. WikiLeaks is an exceptional model, although symptomatic of the kind of independent networked journalism practices that are going to arise. But it does show how anyone interested in new journalisms should also factor in disruptive and challenging ideas as well as trying to guess what mainstream media bosses will want.

Funnily enough, I got some support for this thesis from the impressive managing director of the Washington Post who shared a panel with me at the University of Maryland. Raju Narisetti certainly wants to recruit people with technical skills, writing ability, programming knowledge etc etc. But as he put it, he hopes that the Post will be able to learn *from* the people it hires and that they will bring new ideas to the table.

It shows that mainstream media has learnt that it is not the only source of authority any more. Journalism educators need to realise that, too.

[By the way, please [check out the conference website](#) which will have links to the many speakers who came up with a whole range of practical suggestions and ideas for teaching journalism in the digital age – as well as loads of great

examples of innovative new journalism businesses and platforms and tools]

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