

WikiLeaks: Making Life Difficult (Summer School Guest Blog)

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This report is by Polis Summer School student Felicia Oschmann.

Apart from several photographs of Julian Assange entering the Royal Court of Justice in London during the course of the last weeks, the media's attention seems to have slipped away from the enfant terrible of the political media world. The title of journalism *bete noir*, it seems, has been passed on to the Murdoch family and their followers.



So what characteristics do the Assanges and the Murdochs of this world share? By taking a quick look at the twitter comments that surround these men, it seems that almost everyone has an opinion on them but there's a lack of real information to judge them justly. WikiLeaks has been fuelling headlines for more than a year now, but people still struggle to grasp what it really is.

James Ball, is currently a data journalist working for the Guardian investigations team and a former Wikileaks employee, tried to give us more of an insider account. It addressed a much bigger question: can the general perception of Wikileaks be transformed from that of a dangerous, geeky and indecipherable cable tangle, to that of a model for future journalism?

It soon became clear, that from Ball's perspective, that the relationship between WikiLeaks and mainstream media is not a simple one. Wikileaks names and shames the close and censored relationship between the mainstream media and politics, but it also works with it. It is a symbiotic exchange. In the case of the Afghan and Iraq cable releases, for example, mainstream media put in huge amounts of resources, which transformed the data into accessible and edited documents that otherwise would have been seen as dangerous data-lumps.

Charlie Beckett calls this "Networked Data Journalism". WikiLeaks works with the mainstream media, putting material online with the public supporting these actions. It seems as if governments are still forced to watch this from the sidelines until, as John Naughton has put it, "they learn to live in a WikiLeakable world".

Ball who came to Wikileaks through a conventional media background and has now returned to the safeguard of a national newspaper, has experienced both sides of the story. When students asked him how the life of a WikiLeaks employee differs from that of a "normal" journalist, it soon became clear that it offers neither the glamour of that of a secret-agent nor the security of writing for an established newspaper.

While listening to anecdotes of James carrying around 400,000 secret documents through the streets of London at 2am on a Sunday, or buying computer equipment worth 2000 pounds with 50 pound notes, students quickly realized that this is not your usual daily newsroom grind.

In hindsight, James Ball says, his daily worries were not only about the dangers of being associated with Wikileaks but simply how to pay his next rent. With WikiLeaks spending around 400,000 Euros in total last year (including salaries, technical equipments and rent), one can imagine salaries receiving the smallest share of an already modest pie.

He also gave a warning for students about their "digital fingerprints". James Ball highlighted that the Internet is not as anonymous as most of us believe it to be. His accounts of being forced to turn off his smartphone in order to prevent his GPS from revealing his current whereabouts, was an eye-opener, even for the most tech-savvy students in the classroom.

Furthermore his comparison of working with WikiLeaks and writing on a personal blog, which both give you an independent voice and at the same time expose you to the danger of being fully accountable for your own writing, made it clear that WikiLeaks reflects a more general question of the ethics and accountability of the Internet.

WikiLeaks and the scale and speed in which news can now be spread, poses an ultimate challenge on our current conceptions of what news and journalism are. From a nominal perspective WikiLeaks still seems far from a usual news corporation: it is a closed system, with no board, no independent directors and is generally lacking democratic characteristics. But you can go one step further and question whether any mainstream media outlets can still tick all these boxes.

While the News of the World scandal is likely to keep us on our toes for the next couple of weeks, WikiLeaks has the potential to transform our media landscape permanently. By raising the question whether journalism is doing its job, Julian Assange and his colleagues should be seen as neither the saviour nor the enemy of the media landscape. They should rather be viewed as an unprecedented challenge to the way power works and how the public perceives it to do so.

As a closing question James Ball, was asked his impression of Julian Assange personally. Slightly hesitantly his answers ranged from “surprisingly charming” and “phenomenally intelligent” to (with a large grin on his face) his ability to “make your life difficult”.

Perhaps, one is left to wonder, this is exactly what the enfant terrible has set out to do.

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