



Digital Prometheus: WikiLeaks, the State–Network Dichotomy, and the Antinomies of Academic Reason

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This article analyzes two major threads of academic discussions on the WikiLeaks phenomenon and its influence on international and communication studies, which cause a refuelling and reframing of both the questions and the solutions offered by academics and practitioners in these fields. The research examines a sample of the academic literature produced in 2010–2012, in order to trace how WikiLeaks reframed age-old academic debates: In international relations and politics, the major debate is between transparency and secrecy/security. In media and communication studies the major debate is openness versus control. Perspectives are further divided, not only by discipline but also ideologically by the author's position on the state–network dichotomy. In turn, different academic disciplines can be themselves mapped in terms of their relative closeness to the statist or network side of the controversy.

Introduction

This article focuses on the impact the WikiLeaks phenomenon had on academic debates in international relations and media and communication studies during 2010–2012. The WikiLeaks phenomenon—with or without its connections to the Anonymous collective and the Arab Spring—has had significant ruptural effects on aspects of the global political system. A small, movement-based website inflicted a tremendous informational defeat on the world's last superpower, revealing the possible emergence of a global networked counterpower able to mount effective resistance against the world system, possibly even the emergence of the state–network conflict as the new great power bipolarity after the Cold War.

Therefore, in many respects, notwithstanding WikiLeaks' debated political structures, the WikiLeaks phenomenon expresses the power of organized networks to disrupt hierarchical arrangements of state and capitalist power (on the organizational impact of ICTs pre-Web 2.0, see Karatzogianni, 2006). Recently, we witnessed the diffuse affects and subject-positions mobilized by WikiLeaks through the "Revolutionary Virtual"—the field of construction in which zones of affect are selected and actualized

(Karatzogianni, 2012). As a creation of new zones or assemblages of affect, the WikiLeaks phenomenon can be seen as an event and, like all events, it is controversial. The study of WikiLeaks' academic reception is thus a study of the reverberation of an Event through the social field.

WikiLeaks can be viewed through the figure of Prometheus—the archetypal Internet troll of Greek mythology. Milan (2013) uses the metaphor to tell the stories of groups and individuals who seek to break government and media corporate monopolies: “who like the mythological Prometheus, ‘steal the fire’... a metaphor for technology and communication infrastructure . . . Stealing means ‘reclaiming and reappropriating’ these communications infrastructures to set up autonomous means of communication” (p. 1). Prometheus is a trickster figure. Tricksters in mythology are typically on the side of creativity and chance and, crucially, aligned with the rebel who defies and escapes the order of Fate: “the hero—for example, Prometheus—challenges fate with dignified courage, fights it with varying fortunes, and is not left by the legend without hope of one day bringing a new law to men” (Benjamin, 1995, p. 294). WikiLeaks here stands for exactly such a gesture: Within the world of neoliberalism, the fatalistic advancement of global capital, and of the State as the bearer of Fate (ibid.), has been interrupted by a technological “progress” long forecast by the fatalists, but detoured decisively from their fatalistic narrative of progression. Instead, this Promethean flame is an uncontrollable force of networked power, which seems chaotic from within the statist order of Fate.

Methodologically, we analyze the ideology in academic scholarship by mapping along two axes of the intellectual controversy, which arise in the academic literature immediately after the Collateral Damage video in July 2010. We used Google Scholar to capture academic scholarship and opinion from the summer of 2010 to December 2012, with an original sample of 40 articles, which then extended to snowball sampling stemming from the original sample. Of these, we chose to focus only on the two disciplines. Moreover, we chose that specific timeframe for sampling and did not include the years 2013–2014, an effect of the journal review timeline process, and further, it would take the scope of the study to another level altogether, considering the academic literature involving several subfields. Unfortunately, this means we left out the most significant academic contribution in relation to the WikiLeaks phenomenon thus far by Brevini, Hintz, and McCurdy (2013) and other important works from 2013–2014, which could be examined in future studies. Thus, the work, reflexive of its limitations, presents a broad meta-analysis of the debates surrounding academic scholarship within a specific timeframe, and does not pose itself as an overall meta-analysis of all fields affected by the WikiLeaks phenomenon to this day. Further, a whole section on whistleblowing and legal scholarship as well as several scholars referenced in the extended version of this article are omitted here due to space limitations. Nevertheless, the working paper has been made available (see Robinson & Karatzogianni, 2012).

We found that in international relations (IR) and related disciplines, including diplomacy studies, the main focus is on *transparency* versus *secrecy*: the ethics of whistleblowing versus national security, the impact of leaks on the “war on terror” and American foreign policy, and so on. In disciplines more closely aligned to the social such as culture, media, communication studies, and sociology, the major debate is between *openness* versus *control*. Issues include the relationship between WikiLeaks and the hacker ethic, the constraint of overwhelming state power, the emergence of a global digital public sphere, the changing relationships between old and new media, and the emergence of shifts in social relationships

marked by the current wave of social movements. These differences emerge for a particular reason: the framing of the state–network conflict through the gaze of the state, or from an interpretive standpoint framed by the attempt to understand the social: the people’s standpoint. As Jónsdóttir (2013) writes: “. . . the people of this world have started to understand that this century belongs to us the people. Information is true power. WikiLeaks provided us with this understanding” (p. vi).

International Relations Scholarship: The Right to a Cover-Up?



Figure 1. "Umadbro?" - Internet Culture Meme.

The first standpoint to examine here is that of the state, or Zeus. Like any good trickster, Prometheus is a prolific troll. He has successfully trolled Zeus, who is now, in online terminology, "butthurt." This is a source of endless *Schadenfreude*, or lulz, for Prometheus and his allies. But the state’s reactive affects, directed against the trickster, take the horrifying form of divine vengeance. In academia, the standpoint of the state, and the order of Fate, is borne mainly by mainstream scholars within international relations and security studies.

Statists generally minimize the benefits done by WikiLeaks to maximize its alleged harms. From the statist point of view, the events exposed in the WikiLeaks cables are unsurprising. Anarchy is theorized by realist IR scholars as the absence of a global centralized government, which views the state—despite its evils—as a necessary guarantee of a worthwhile life. Further, for realists, it is normal for states to use *Realpolitik* to achieve their objectives. Indeed, the content of the cables may strengthen realists against rivals such as liberals and constructivists, who maintain that states can be constrained by norms

and ethics. The realist objection to WikiLeaks is not, therefore, to the information revealed, but to the violation of a state privilege, which is taken to amount to an anarchist destruction of the state (Lim, 2010). Steinmetz (2012) explains the American state's responses—such as threatening to prosecute Julian Assange for espionage, labelling WikiLeaks a terrorist group, and calling for the execution of whistleblowers—the following way:

Realpolitik explains why those events—and others—may have occurred and why the government became so upset when revealed. It is posited here that the United States was largely not concerned with maintaining foreign policy relations for ethical or moralistic reasons. Rather, these relationships were manipulated and maintained for the state's own interests. (2012, p. 22)

Steinmetz admits a real danger that the government can use secrecy to cover up wrongdoing (ibid.). Steinmetz demonstrates through his analysis of secondary data sources that the government officials' public statements "attempt to manipulate public opinion in a manner conducive to Realpolitik governance" (ibid., p. 27). His analysis points to the United States' arbitrary rhetoric of supporting government transparency and whistleblowing, but considering WikiLeaks an organization seeking to undermine national security. In this way "the U.S. reserves the right to define who is and who is not a whistle-blower and seeks ways to prosecute those who are not categorized as such" (ibid., p. 35), while this "process of employing arbitrary rhetoric then deciding who is covered is a result of intense Realpolitik" (ibid., p. 36).

There are two views of cyberspace and its relationship to society: a view that cyberspace must conform to existing institutions and a view that cyberspace is re-ordering society and unleashing new possibilities for human freedom (Sternier, 2011, p. 1). These two views can be summarized as a state and a network perspective, respectively. Not surprisingly, Sternier is broadly sympathetic to the former view, maintaining that WikiLeaks has harmed American national security and typifying Internet freedom advocates as "expansionists" (ibid., p. 3). This follows a long tradition in IR of accusing new political formations of aggression and revisionism, disrupting the stable balance of world peace. So-called expansionists ostensibly believe that "large institutions and organizations, such as governments, are not entitled to privacy or secrecy" (ibid., p. 4). On the other side, proponents of imposed conformity are typified as instrumental, seeing cyberspace as a "tool of society" which "should conform to established relationships, values and laws" (ibid.). Despite this assessment, Sternier also sees WikiLeaks as part of a trend which is here to stay, based in the culture of the Internet and which will "undermine the long-term utility of the Internet for commerce and governance" (ibid., p. 3). He sees the two sides engaged in an intensifying conflict which is playing out in courts and legislatures across fields such as Internet neutrality and intellectual property (ibid.). Nevertheless, this idea of expansionism is seriously problematic.

For instance, Betz and Stevens (2012), from a cybersecurity perspective, argue for a less repressive approach to cyberspace governance. To benefit from its economic potential, the state must accept the autonomy of cyberspace. The division among statist scholars shows a key dilemma of state power, between the addition of axioms and tolerance of autonomy so as to exploit it, and the subtraction of axioms and repression of autonomy so as to suppress lines of flight (Robinson & Karatzogianni, 2010).

The expansion of capital, and thus of state power, depends on exploitation of flows of creativity, but tolerating or enabling these flows requires a relaxation of the pervasive desire for control. In seeking to make cyberspace "safe" for itself, the state risks killing the goose that lays the golden eggs. Ultimately the Promethean fire of constitutive power underpins the order of Fate, and Zeus is at risk of destroying himself along with his "enemy."

The WikiLeaks phenomenon is a line of flight, or as put by Saunders (2011), a hacktivist challenge to the diplomatic system. He argues that the cables on the whole revealed little more than gossip—such as the scandalous leaks about Berlusconi, Qaddafi, and Putin—or else affirmed unsurprising facts about American foreign policy, such as Yemen's collusion in drone strikes, NATO plans to defend the Baltic States and Poland, and American anger at Armenian arms sales to Iran. A few leaks, he admits, were genuinely revealing, such as American complicity in Ukrainian tank sales to Southern Sudanese militias and Hillary Clinton's orders to spy on key UN officials (ibid.). More broadly, he sees the WikiLeaks phenomenon as a "crisis" which threatens "traditional forms of diplomatic power in the international system, particularly those that are dependent on closed networks, reliable distinctions between public/private information and established geopolitical narratives" (ibid., p. 2). This challenge comes from emergent structures of digitized global communications: "Perhaps at no time in history have ordinary citizens possessed so much power in the field of global politics" (ibid., p. 9). Overall, however, Saunders' verdict rules out the participation of new political formations in global diplomacy: "[N]o member of the WikiLeaks will ever be called upon to solve the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, negotiate trade agreements between Azerbaijan and Russia, or set environmental policy for the G-20" (ibid.).

And yet Bronk (2011) emphasizes the rise of "cyber-enabled diplomacy" in which the U.S. government uses cyberspace for diplomatic purposes. He suggests that the WikiLeaks phenomenon triggered the U.S. state's decision to install a "cyber coordinator" (ibid., p. 4), but also suggests that the incident is ultimately unimportant since similar information breaches are unlikely to be repeated in similar ways (ibid.). Retrospectively, the Edward Snowden leaks in the summer of 2013 have spectacularly refuted this argument. On a similar note, Erbacher (2011) uses the WikiLeaks phenomenon as the basis for a discussion of technical means of preventing further leaks—deemed in the usual fear-inflated language as "insider threats." He proposes the use of procedures which will expose "significant irregularities" so as to identify threats (ibid., p. 1). As Erbacher admits, such profiling has traditionally been avoided because it both fails to detect actual threats and accuses too many innocent people. In the authoritarian drive for a threat-free, totally controlled world, Erbacher glorifies the use of data mining techniques, which effectively can breach both privacy and encryption and criminalize difference. The NSA and GCHQ surveillance operations as revealed by Edward Snowden are a case in point of the pitfalls of such approach and the potential for abuse.

French critical scholars Devin and Törnquist-Chesnier (2010) argue that diplomacy is evolving into a new configuration in which the public-versus-secret dichotomy no longer operates, and the relation to nonstate actors becomes more important. This "opens up new fields for research by questioning the intra-systemic relations of a 'diplomatic community'" conceived in expanded terms, examining networks of diplomacy in terms of vertical and horizontal connections (ibid., p. 73). They call for a move toward a "new diplomacy" that is multilateral, public, and itinerant instead of secretive, sedentary, and

individualized, a transition arguably aided by WikiLeaks, which is a symptom of the newfound vulnerability of states to nonstate actors (ibid., p. 71).

Diplomacy discussions also involve fears that diplomacy, as currently constituted, is at risk. According to its advocates, the diplomatic privilege and the confidentiality of diplomatic communications are supposed to allow "states to communicate with each other in open and candid ways, and also for important figures to say things they think true, but too politically damaging or physically dangerous for publication" (Page & Spence, 2011, p. 237). Page and Spence argue that the system is flawed and requires change. The leaks should inspire caution in America's sources, as well as raising concern over the boundaries between diplomacy and espionage. Nevertheless, they feel that in the longer term diplomacy will not change and, if anything, will become more secretive rather than less (ibid.). Governments are more likely to respond to the risk of leaks through increasing self-censorship, secrecy, and the use of oral briefings, which "will lead to worse decisions and less accountability for the decisions that are made. It seems a high price to pay for gossip" (Chesterman, 2011, p. 4). One can perhaps revisit the irony of such visions of diplomacy, with Assange living under diplomatic asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy since June 19, 2012, and with the British government threatening to violate diplomatic norms to get him out.

On the basis of the WikiLeaks phenomenon, Rosenzweig (2011) argues that the U.S. needs an online counterinsurgency strategy. He sees WikiLeaks as "launching an assault on state authority" (pp. 1–2), expressing an enemy ideology which is shared by groups such as Anonymous. He also suggests that Anonymous' vulnerability to counterattack is likely temporary. He calls for attacks to "isolate fringe actors from the general populace and deny them support and refuge" (ibid., p. 5). Though differentiated from a purely technical response, this approach still fails to engage with the adversary on anything other than an operational level. The technical means used are simply broader (and more dangerous to civil liberties). The possibility that actions against a secretive and repressive state might be justified is simply framed out of this kind of analysis, which takes the legitimacy of the global system for granted and sees any means which preserve it as justified.

Strong statist positions have also appeared in the ethical theory literature. For instance, Somerville (2010) had argued that leaking is a wrong means, which is not outweighed by good ends, as well as arguing that it poses large risks such as global war. She argues that it poses such a threat to America's "social capital"—such as trust in the government—to be considered harmful. In other words, government wrongdoing should be covered up so as to maintain the basis for social support for the dominant system. Responding to Somerville's view, media and propaganda theorist Marlin (2011) argues that WikiLeaks is on the whole a good thing for media ethics. This does not simply mean that ends justify means, but a higher ethical good negates the wrongness of the means. Hence, Marlin maintains that WikiLeaks is deontologically—not only consequentially—defensible. WikiLeaks is a counterforce against antidemocratic forces in the contemporary world, providing "the raw material that the public often needs to form sound judgements" (ibid., p. 5). WikiLeaks could also lead to great goods, such as making it harder to fabricate the basis for going to war (Ibid.). He concludes that "some drastic means are needed to push back against the increasing inequalities favouring the very rich" (ibid., p. 6). Marlin thus embraces power redistribution from concentrated to diffuse forces, which WikiLeaks entails, whereas Somerville construes it as a threat. There is a significant irony here. In other contexts, the state is all for what Virilio

(1997) terms "telepresence," supporting surveillance with the duplicitous claim "nothing to hide = nothing to fear." The inversion of telepresence, the sudden exposure of the state to the ease of visibility in the information age, thus exposes the hypocrisy of its own reactions, seeking a special exception from the vulnerability to visibility it imposes on others.

Overall, critical IR scholars emphasize the outpouring of violent rhetoric and repressive actions by the American regime, from threats to assassinate Assange or designate WikiLeaks a terrorist group, to the attempts to have Assange extradited. Such responses are taken to show the worst about sovereign power, as they "amount to a profound showing of authoritarianism" (Springer et al., 2012). The broader context of WikiLeaks is one in which the U.S. is attempting to reproduce a climate of global war. Strategic analysts such as Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (n.d.) offer a constructivist account of the situation. These authors suggest that strategic narratives are "a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of international politics to shape behaviour of domestic and international actors" (ibid., p. 8). The argument that "American identities are deeply embedded and remain heavily imbued with racial, religious and imperial features" also challenges any transformational claims of the Obama national security strategy (Parmar, 2011, p. 153). To put it bluntly, the U.S. state is seeking to keep alive the "war on terror" strategic narrative, even while seeking multilateral engagement (Gray, 2011).

"We Told You So": Sociology, Media, and Communication Studies

What is for statist a matter of loss of control in the project of protecting national security is for social scholars a matter of potentially emancipatory change. Scholars of diplomacy have a vested interest in the preservation of diplomatic records necessary to the pursuit of their own craft and, hence, in the availability of untainted records in 30 years, rather than instant records now and a risk of no records tomorrow. Scholars in other fields, in contrast, have found the WikiLeaks cables an invaluable source of data. For instance, human geographers find the data revealed to be a treasure trove for mapping contemporary conflicts (O'Loughlin, Witmer, Linke, & Thorwardson, 2010). Similarly, el-Said (2012, p. 1) suggests that the leaked cables show a "bleak picture" of American imposition of intellectual property laws on the Global South. He uses the WikiLeaks cables on the American-Jordanian free trade agreement negotiations to reveal America's maneuvers and agenda, with the U.S. pushing on behalf of pharmaceutical lobbyists to impose their patents on Jordan, to the detriment of the Jordanian health system. El-Said's research on Jordan is echoed by Sarikakis (2011), who shows that WikiLeaks exposed American lobbying for repressive antipiracy laws in France and Spain. WikiLeaks has provided a valuable trove of data, which, due to its publicity, can be mined by academics as well as journalists and activists.

At the core of the media-communication debate, the broader issue of transparency versus privacy is a recurring theme. Citizen journalist Heather Brooke (2011) frames the WikiLeaks phenomenon as part of a wider information war in which grassroots activists challenge the control over information exercised by the ruling establishment. She suggests that this movement could determine whether the Internet empowers people or ushers in a new age of surveillance. Ludlow (2010) emphasizes the role of hacker ethics in WikiLeaks, particularly the idea of sharing information, and ridicules the posture of statist who seek an evil mastermind behind the organization. In contrast, Rosen (2011) frames the issue in terms of the death of privacy in an era of enforced visibility. Arguably, this debate about values is something of a

smokescreen for the real stakes, which are about diffuse versus concentrated power. It might be suggested that the values of transparency or secrecy are actually split: Neither state secrecy nor the transparency of social action to state surveillance are positive phenomena. Correspondingly, both individual anonymity, or small-group invisibility, and "sousveillance" against the powerful are liberatory. The dispute's real stakes are not between two generic values applied in a classless way but, rather, in a conflict between concentrated and diffuse forms of power.

Although many social scholars are interested in the revolutionary potential of new technologies, some are more interested in how this potential can be recuperated. From a citizenship and participation perspective, (Bruns, 2012) suggests that the "self-organising community responses" shown by the Anonymous actions and WikiLeaks' mirroring project show the ability for networked groups to "bypass or leapfrog, at least temporarily, most organisational or administrative hurdles" (p. 35). WikiLeaks is itself sustained by citizen-to-citizen connections, drawing on a sense of directly "fighting the system" (ibid., p. 46). As befits someone interested in citizen integration, however, he is also concerned that the dynamic is "too decentralised," "outside the social compact of society," and lacking means for citizen-government negotiation (ibid., p. 47).

A key contribution to this debate comes from Benkler (2011), who argues that the Internet renders media more censorship-resistant, altering the power distribution among actors in an actor-network (p. 723). He suggests that the Internet makes actors such as WikiLeaks freer than they would otherwise be, which in turn constrains actors such as the U.S. government:

WikiLeaks can be said to be an exercise in counter-power, because it disrupts the organizational-technical form in which governments and large companies habitually control the flow of information about their behavior in ways that constrain the capacity of others to criticize them. (ibid., p. 728)

Furthermore, the Internet provided Chelsea Manning with information about the Army and a means to disseminate information, which gave her increased power (Benkler, 2011, p. 722). Alleyne's (2011) discussion emphasizes that WikiLeaks acted as a focal point for a global community of hackers and open-source activists, using methods that Alleyne emphasizes are hardly new and not at all reducible to the personality of Assange.

Furthermore, WikiLeaks can be "seen as the pilot phase in the evolution toward a far more generalized culture of anarchic exposure beyond the traditional politics of openness and transparency" (Lovink, 2011, p. 177). Lovink views WikiLeaks as a small player in global affairs, which is nevertheless able to exercise power through media attention and spectacular revelations, bypassing the formal "one-world" structures that bind most civil society groups into existing forms of state power (ibid., p. 178). He also suggests that the U.S. state is a relatively soft target, compared to more authoritarian or culturally diverse states, or to corporations. In retrospect, his argument holds considerable weight in light of the Snowden revelations in the summer of 2013. The structural difficulties with WikiLeaks stem from its position somewhere between a mere conduit for data and a media agency selecting and publicizing content. Lovink also emphasizes the impact of 1980s hacker culture and problems with Assange's

“sovereign” role in the organization (ibid.). Against the image of Internet expansionists, Lovink suggests that statists are seceding from a previous libertarian consensus that kept regulation at arm’s length. This is occurring because the outcomes of growing social networking are not what corporate rulers wanted (ibid.).

Network power now escapes the apparatus of power, much more than does traditional journalism (Castells, 2010). Attempts to shut down WikiLeaks by cutting its connections have failed because of the proliferation of mirror sites, showing the structural prevalence of freedom of information today. “No security is at stake for states. At issue is the right of citizens to know what their governments are doing and thinking. Hence, the WikiLeaks affair is an instance of cyberwar between states and civil society” (ibid., paras. 6–7). In a later work, Castells (2012) embeds WikiLeaks in a broader account of technologically mediated social change. Observing that Internet use increases people’s valuation of autonomy and also discussing the Arab Spring, Castells suggests that WikiLeaks is part of a broader “mass insurrection against secret information.” What is important about WikiLeaks is the reaction against it, not WikiLeaks itself. This reaction is so excessive because WikiLeaks attacks the heart of contemporary power: control over information. The state–network conflict exemplified by WikiLeaks is what Balász Bodó (2011) understands as a manifestation of the counterpower of networks. “The ability to place the state under surveillance limits and ultimately renders present day sovereignty obsolete. It can also be argued that WikiLeaks (or rather the logic of it) is a new sovereign in the global political/economic sphere.” Bodó suggests that the repressive response to WikiLeaks raises questions about how networked power can sustain itself when states attack. WikiLeaks was attacked through its connections to a world system vulnerable to statist and corporate intervention—its access to the global payment system, Web hosting, and use of the domain name system. This happened without any legal charges or due process. Network power still suffers from vulnerabilities relative to the state, and to state uses of networked power to their own advantage. Such vulnerabilities are already being addressed through projects such as the PirateBay plan to operate servers from mobile drones, the emergence of BitCoin, and the creation of radio-based Internet transmission to combat state blackouts. Bodó also repeats the criticisms of WikiLeaks’ organizational model, which is clandestine and far from transparent, suggesting that it shares too much of its social logic with its adversaries and could be becoming a new sovereign. This reveals a possible tension between the hacker ethic and the goal of a public, networked world.

Despite this tension, Christofletti and Oliveira (2011) view WikiLeaks as the most potentially transforming journalism since the rise of Twitter and a part of a growing and irreversible trend. Analyzing it as a crossover between journalistic ethics and hacker ethics, they argue that it is a positive force for uncovering information in the public interest (ibid.). Chadwick (2011) uses WikiLeaks as a case study of an emerging hybridity between old and new media, which throws into question the separation of the two within media studies. WikiLeaks is part of “broader networks of affinity” defined by “libertarian hacker culture” (ibid., p. 17) and is best defined as a “sociotechnical assemblage” (Ibid., p. 21). Further, collaboration with old-media partners is used as a way to increase impact and recognition (ibid., pp. 24–25), leading to a “symbiotic” relationship to traditional media (ibid., p. 26). On the other side, traditional media used a custom search engine to mine the massive trove of data provided by WikiLeaks (ibid.). Chadwick also refers to constant attempts by journalists to boundary-police their relationship to WikiLeaks, falsely claiming to be more responsible or that WikiLeaks was “just a source” (ibid., p. 35),

claims which leave WikiLeaks vulnerable, in violation of older precedents of media rights (ibid.). In contrast, he argues that WikiLeaks "occupies an important boundary space between old and new media" (ibid., p. 36).

Conclusion: Unchaining the Digital Prometheus?

The receptions of the WikiLeaks phenomenon across (and on the margins of) academia are thus diverse, and reflect different subject-positions in relation to the eventual effects, both of the WikiLeaks phenomenon itself and of the broader redistribution of social power that it expresses and portends. The WikiLeaks phenomenon is a characteristic instance of an irruptive event that disrupts an existing power order. The reactionary response of statisticians seeking to preserve or restore a status quo ante manifests itself in a series of panicked outpourings calling for the restoration of order. In contrast, scholars sympathetic to emerging social networks—whether as a source of a revolutionary, peer-to-peer social alternative, a source of constraint on overempowered elites, or a source of energies and innovation to be exploited by capital—have embraced WikiLeaks as an expression of fundamentally positive changes. Internet and network scholars have been unsurprised at the phenomenon, which demonstrates the validity of their existing work on emerging forms of networked power, while media scholars have welcomed the new informational openness enabled by digital media.

Overall, then, what are the prospects that the Digital Prometheus can be unchained from the Law of Zeus? Ultimately, the persistence and expansion of networked power does not come down to the contributions of scholars. It is an effect of the innovations made by social movements and dissidents on the one hand and logistical controllers on the other. It can be questioned whether scholarly commentary can really do much more than interpret the forces at play, arguably aiding their recuperation. Nevertheless, different streams of scholarship are feeding rather differently into the balance of forces. While securitarian statisticians provide a veneer of respectability to the repressive backlash, social researchers frequently contribute to the comprehensibility of the WikiLeaks phenomenon, inserting it in a wider social context and showing its wider social effects. By rebutting the statisticians' hysteria, helping the transmissibility of emergent forces to new domains, reducing fear of the unknown, and showing the enormous positive potential of networked social forces, it is hoped that scholars can play a role in the process of unchaining Prometheus.

To conclude, this article was researched during 2010–2012 in order to understand the immediate impact of WikiLeaks in the relevant academic fields. Since then, Edward Snowden, by revealing the massive surveillance operations of the U.S. government, has opened further, and in a spectacular manner, the debate about ethics and privacy in cybersecurity and Internet governance, which earlier WikiLeaks inevitably forced on the academe. It is our view that this is healthy and vital, however many antinomies it generates, for academics involved in the debates explored here and elsewhere, to engage in debates with practitioners that could still unleash creative energies to a new world, where individual privacy is protected and where social justice, solidarity, and transparency are enmeshed in free, open, and inclusive social networks.

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