

WikiLeaks, a tool

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Abstract

Julian Assange, founder of WikiLeaks claims to have invented “scientific journalism”; that is, the possibility for readers to have direct access to raw materials. But have journalism and diplomacy changed with WikiLeaks? WikiLeaks symbolizes the next generation of citizen movements that reject the raison d'état and its leaks have brought up-to-date the historical conflict between the obligation of the press to inform and the need for governments to protect what they don't want you to know. But is WikiLeaks the fifth power or has its impact been overestimated? What has changed is the technology, the tool. WikiLeaks is a new transgression that, for journalism and diplomacy, has transformed a practice that was, until recently, a craft into something industrial. WikiLeaks is the evolution of leaks in the internet revolution.

Keywords

WikiLeaks, diplomacy, journalism, internet, sources of information.

Resum

Julian Assange, fundador de Wikileaks, reivindica haver inventat el “periodisme científic”, és a dir, la possibilitat que els lectors tinguin accés directe a la matèria primera. Però han canviat el periodisme i la diplomàcia amb les filtracions de Wikileaks? Wikileaks simbolitza la darrera generació dels moviments ciutadans que rebutgen la raison d'État, i les seves filtracions han actualitzat la pugna històrica entre l'obligació de la premsa a informar i la necessitat dels governs de protegir el que no volen que se sàpiga. Però Wikileaks és el cinquè poder o se n'ha sobreestimat l'impacte? El que ha canviat és la tecnologia, l'eina. Wikileaks és una nova transgressió que, per al periodisme i la diplomàcia, ha convertit en industrial una pràctica fins fa ben poc artesanal. Wikileaks és l'evolució de les filtracions en la revolució d'internet.

Paraules clau

Wikileaks, diplomàcia, periodisme, internet, fonts d'informació.

James Reston, one of the greats of the golden age of US press journalism, won one of his two Pulitzer prizes for an exclusive that leaked details on the Allied position regarding the United Nations founding charter. Reston published the draft in 1945 thanks to the complicity of a Chinese interpreter with whom he had worked at a news agency. His former colleague, who knew what was being discussed down to the last detail, passed him the draft due to the upset caused by its content to the Chinese delegation.

Reston was a press journalist and the last *insider*, the US way of describing someone with direct access to the sources of power. Walter Lippmann, Reston's friend, was fundamental in developing US journalism. His prestige and influence marked the end of the hegemony of ideological journalism in the United States and the beginning of the predominance of informative and interpretative journalism. This journalism reached its peak with Reston. These were the years when *The New York Times* (the newspaper of his whole life) became one of the key instruments for information and diplomacy.

If Reston had been alive in June 2006 (he died on 6 December 1995), he would surely have been one of the journalists chosen by *The New York Times* to analyse the contents

of the 251,287 State Department documents obtained weeks before by WikiLeaks (a secretive website of anti-secret vigilantes) through Bradley Manning, a 26-year-old disillusioned US officer. In June 2006, Alan Rusbridger, editor of the British newspaper *The Guardian*, called Bill Keller, at that time Director of *The New York Times*, to tell him cryptically that WikiLeaks had leaked some confidential documents. As a result of this conversation, five of the press (*The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *El País*, *Le Monde* and *Der Spiegel*) had access to these documents, which had come from 274 US embassies and were dated between 28 December 1966 and 28 February 2010. After a long and intense analysis, the five publications started to publish the first 220 cables on 28 November 2010.

A few days after having published the first leaks, Franco Frattini, Minister of Foreign Affairs for Silvio Berlusconi, accused Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, of “destroying the world”. This was an exaggeration but, more optimistically, a very different phase had started to the phase in which Reston had been one of the leading players. But are these two phases so very different? What is the difference between leaking the draft UN charter and WikiLeaks' leaks? Has WikiLeaks changed journalism and diplomacy forever?

A long time before WikiLeaks was born in 2006 and started its operations in 2007, the internet had already altered journalism by creating an open global market with easier access to sources and audiences and with less respect for the concepts of privacy and secrecy. In October 1969, two computers located 600 kilometres from each other were connected and became the embryo of the network we now know as the internet. After three decades the internet covers almost the entire planet and, according to the Irish agency Nua, a third of the world's population now surfs the internet. This digital revolution has changed a lot of things, not just journalism and diplomacy.

Nicholas Carr, the author of *The Shallows. What the internet is doing to our brains* (W.W. Norton & Co. 2011), has warned us that the internet is eroding our capacity to control our thoughts and to think independently. When Carr realised that his ability to concentrate had shrunk considerably, he started to ask himself whether it might be due to the number of hours spent in front of a computer. And the result has been *The Shallows*, in which he warns us of what the internet is doing, in his opinion, to our brains.

The internet has also altered the journalism of James Reston. Among other things it has made it interactive. The appearance of e-journalism has fragmented audiences. For example, the influence of the press on foreign policy, when Walter Lippmann's syndicated columns acted like CNN, started to decline in the United States in the 1970s. And this decline has sharpened since then with the development of the so-called blogosphere and social networks, which have proved to be powerful tools to motivate political campaigns, both domestic and international. However, has this competition improved the information on and analysis of foreign policy? This doesn't seem to have been the case at all. Thomas Jefferson once suggested that newspapers should be divided into four sections: "Truths, probabilities, possibilities and lies" (Lepore 2009, 32). This was a way of saying that newspapers have not always been on the side of truth. And this is true. But the internet seems to be a more suitable channel for the last of the sections predicted by Jefferson.

The internet has not only led to change. For the apocalyptic among us, the internet hails the disappearance of newspapers. Philip Mayer, author of *The Vanishing Newspaper* (2004), claims that the last physical newspaper to be recycled will be published in April 2040, eight years before the 600th anniversary of Gutenberg's movable press. Thomas Jefferson would not have believed it. Jefferson, the third President of the United States, wrote in a letter dated 1787: "[...] were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter".

The first modern newspapers were born with the support of politicians. These were the days, in the 19th century, when it was said that the press should educate. The conservatives had their newspaper and the liberals, theirs. But indoctrination ended when a society columnist invented the popular press. And as a great evil can give rise to a great good, the success

of the popular or sensationalist press forced the partisan press to change. So started an era in which the press had to inform, which is no mean thing. Then the rules of play changed. Newspaper revenue came from advertising by firms that wanted to sell their products. And the price of a newspaper became a small fraction of the cost of the information. But this model has entered into crisis and, for the apocalyptic, is the announcement of a world without newspapers, although we have never read as much as we do now. So where's the problem? The fact is that the place where most journalistic stories are read is the internet, although the most surprising thing is that the majority of these stories still come from physical newspapers. Alex S. Jones, Director of the Shorenstein Center of Harvard University, has quantified this: "My own estimate is that 85 percent of professionally reported accountability news comes from newspapers" (Jones 2009, 53).

Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, now claims to have invented what he calls "scientific journalism"; i.e. journalism that enables readers, when they access the informative raw material, to judge what is correct or incorrect in the work of journalists. But history shows that physical newspapers have published confidential documents since they first started, although it's also true that these leaks have multiplied since the internet appeared, thanks to technological innovations. In any case, the most significant fact from a journalistic point of view is that the publication of the State Department documents by five publications which, for months, had studied and analysed their content, highlighted the need for explanatory journalism, among other things, so that readers wouldn't get their wires crossed.

Explanatory journalism was required in the case of WikiLeaks because the State Department cables were of a highly varied nature. First, some were a version of an event. Second, some were simply speculative. Third, others were not specific enough. And fourth, some were also totally wrong.

But what has been and is the impact of the leaks from WikiLeaks on journalism and diplomacy? Jean-Christophe Rufin, a writer and diplomat, believes that WikiLeaks symbolises the latest generation of citizen movements that, such as Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières, an organisation of which he is one of the founders, reject the *raison d'État*. If the British politician, Burke, at the end of the 18th century, was the first to use the euphemism of the fourth power to mean the influence of the press, Rufin believes that "citizen movements such as WikiLeaks now represent, in the 21st century, the fifth power" (Rufin 2010, 18).

For Rufin, WikiLeaks' impact on journalism is a question of size. "The idea of WikiLeaks actually follows the logic of marketing", Rufin states. In other words, an activity that, until very recently, was practically artisan, such as the handing over, in person, of the UN's founding charter to Reston, has become mass produced. The leaking of secret documents is as old as journalism but, historically, this has been carried out on a small scale, although some media, such as the case in France of *Le Canard Enchaîné*, may have made it their speciality. With

WikiLeaks, a new tool capable of leaking 251,287 State Department documents, the size has changed. The transgression, therefore, has taken on a different nature. And illegality, provocation and even secrecy might have become the method. And this new citizen action would be impossible without the growing influence of the virtual networks.

But while the tool and the methods are new, the motivation is still the same as in Reston's time, both in terms of journalism and diplomacy. Journalism should be able to explain the content of what is being leaked, and the purpose of the leak should be related to citizens' desire to know what the government is doing in their name.

However, the world is not necessarily more transparent after WikiLeaks. Bill Keller, at that time Director of *The New York Times*, has written that "Nor is it clear to me that WikiLeaks represents some kind of cosmic triumph of transparency... But I suspect that we have not reached a state of information anarchy. At least not yet" (Keller 2011, 1, 6, 7). So has WikiLeaks changed how journalism is carried out? Keller has answered that question: "Frankly I think the impact of WikiLeaks ... has probably been overblown". It's quite another matter whether WikiLeaks and the requirement to separate the wheat from the chaff in what is leaked have served to underline the need of the press to become explanatory. And, at the same time, these leaks have also served to update the historic battle between the press's duty to inform and governments' responsibility to protect what they don't want to be known. The result is that public opinion in many countries has had the chance to access what their governments are doing.

Perhaps it's overblown to suggest that the leaks from WikiLeaks will ensure diplomacy is never the same again. But if Assange's aim was to change the world of diplomacy, he might have achieved something. The idea that the management of all foreign policy needs a strong dose of secrecy to limit public debate continues to have a lot of backers. The situation today is not what it was at the time of the Vienna Congress, when Klemens Wenzel Lothar von Metternich was able to design the map of absolutist Europe as he wished without meddling from public opinion, which was inexistent at that time. But secrecy is still going strong.

The history of diplomacy is the evolution of relations between states. Is it an art, as suggested by some of its beneficiaries? A system of persuasion, as told by those who earn their lives by persuading? Or is it simply a sometimes explosive mixture of force, threats and promises, as maintained by its victims, who are also numerous? The US comedian Will Rogers once defined diplomacy as "the art of saying 'nice doggie' until you can find a rock". Rogers could have been a diplomat.

However, not all diplomats could be applauded for being good comedians. One of the first to prove this was the British ambassador Sir Henry Wotton who, in the 17th century, did not make the King laugh when he said "An ambassador is an honest man sent to lie abroad for the good of his country". This diplomat also said that "The further you go from the Church of Rome,

the nearer you are to God". And Abraham de Wicquefort, author of one of the first diplomacy manuals, beat WikiLeaks by a few centuries and wrote "the diplomat is an honest spy".

Cardinal Richelieu, dedicated to *raison d'État* and Prime Minister of France from 1624 to 1642, is a case that warrants separate consideration. He was behind the diplomacy that benefited from the support of the Ottoman Sultan to fight the Catholic house of Hapsburg. And when news came of his death, it is said that Pope Urban VIII, who was not very diplomatic, blurted out "If there is a God, the Cardinal de Richelieu will have much to answer for. If not... well, he had a successful life" (Kissinger 1994, 58).

Diplomacy is still the best way to overcome discrepancies, prevent conflicts and find a solution to them. That's why some of the revelations made by WikiLeaks have merely confirmed that the wheel is turning. But others have been less innocent, as they have confirmed the suspicion that US diplomats have been carrying out soft espionage for years. And the problem is that their big secret has been unveiled. According to the leaks, Vladimir Putin is in charge of a mafia state "infected by large scale corruption". The Arab regimes in the Persian Gulf, the elites of which "dodge Islamic law and are fond of carnal pastimes", prefer "a conventional war against Iran now, rather than a nuclear one". Corruption "achieves the highest reaches of power in Mohamed VI's Morocco". The Spanish government (of Zapatero) "supported Western Sahara for a favourable solution to Morocco". In Tunisia, the President's family "steals everything of value". Chavez and drug smuggling "finance Ortega's Nicaragua". In Algeria, "corruption has even reached the President's brothers". And the United States mistrusts "Mexico's ability to win the drug war, given the corruption". Perhaps WikiLeaks won't change diplomacy from top to bottom but its leaks, as well as Facebook, did help to promote the Arab revolts of 2011.

However, is this completely new? It doesn't seem so. Lisa Anderson, President of the American University in Cairo, explained it as follows: "In Tunisia, protesters escalated calls for the restoration of the country's suspended Constitution. Meanwhile, Egyptians rose in revolt as strikes across the country... toppled the government. In Libya, provincial leaders worked frenetically to strengthen their newly independent republic. This was in 1919 [...] The uprisings of 1919 also suggest that the calculated spread of popular movements seen across the Arab world last winter (2011) is not a new phenomenon" (Anderson 2011, 2-7). Ninety years ago, the words that sparked off the Arab upheavals were those of the famous Fourteen Points speech by the US President Woodrow Wilson, who defended the self-government of peoples, including Arabs, who had just freed themselves from Ottoman rule. And Wilson's words were transmitted by telegraph, the new tool of the time.

One of the consequences of the leaks from WikiLeaks has been the humiliation of the US diplomatic service, incapable of keeping its secrets. But this had already happened several times before, even with other methods. In 1971, Daniel Ellsberg, an analyst with the RAND Corporation (a think tank re-

lated to the Pentagon), photocopied 7,000 pages of a report that proved the official lies about the Vietnam war and leaked them to *The New York Times*; the consequence was that the US pulled out of Vietnam in 1973. In 1972, Mark Felt, number two at the FBI and universally known by the pseudonym *Deep Throat*, leaked information to *The Washington Post* that directly implicated President Richard Nixon in the Watergate scandal; the consequence was Nixon's resignation. And, in 2004, Sergeant Joseph Darby denounced on the internet the torture and mistreatment in Abu Ghraib carried out by US forces in the Iraq war; the consequence was a chain of resignations and disgrace for the US intervention.

The leaks from WikiLeaks have harmed the credibility of the US security systems, which has led to Republican criticism of Barack Obama's administration. And it will possibly hinder future US diplomatic contacts with business people, politicians and journalists. But power will look for new ways to keep its secrets. And not for the first time. What has changed is the technology, which has multiplied the number of leaks and the possibility to distribute them to larger audiences. Three decades ago, stealing a classified document might have required the use of a miniature camera; now the spy or traitor of thirty years ago would be amazed by the possibilities afforded by new technologies, as demonstrated by Bradley Manning in downloading secret documents onto a CD which he took to his workplace with the excuse that he wanted to listen to some Lady Gaga songs.

Journalism's reaction to the leaks from WikiLeaks has also had been contradictory. Mark Zuckerberg, founder of the social network Facebook, was chosen as *Time* magazine's person of the year in 2010. This was an interesting decision that, without doubt, was also motivated by certain interests, since Zuckerberg ousted Assange, in spite of the fact that the founder of WikiLeaks was the one who had received most votes from internet users. And regarding diplomacy, its paths will always be unsuspected. In autumn 1961, as explained in his magnificent memoirs (Reston 1991), Reston was called to the Whitehouse by John F. Kennedy. The President was direct: Washington was prepared to give in to the Berlin crisis but felt it was risky to use the diplomatic channels to send an ultimatum to Moscow. Kennedy's idea was for Reston to launch the message. And Reston wrote that Washington might respond with military force if the Soviets blocked the accesses to Berlin. The Soviet diplomats bought the first edition of *The New York Times* and understood the column. And, after half a century, WikiLeaks is the evolution of leaks in the internet revolution.

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