Chapter 11
WikiLeaks and the Changing Forms of Information Politics in the "Network Society"

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ABSTRACT

This chapter offers an analysis of one instance of "mass self-communication" namely the website WikiLeaks. Founded in 2006 by Australian internet activist Julian Paul Assange, WikiLeaks aimed to facilitate an anonymous electronic drop box for whistleblowers. WikiLeaks has promoted the cause of investigative journalism, organising citizens into a powerful force of news-gatherers, and laying bare a wealth of privileged information. By first disrupting and then decentralising relations of power, WikiLeaks encourages new ways of thinking. At the heart of this process is a radical recasting of what counts as a public service ethos, one which promises to reinvigorate traditional conceptions of journalism's role and responsibilities in a democratic culture.

INTRODUCTION

[I]f we do not know the forms of power in the network society, we cannot neutralize the unjust exercise of power. And if we do not know who exactly the power-holders are and where to find them, we cannot challenge their hidden, yet decisive domination (Castells, 2009).

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Web 2.0 is at the heart of what Manuel Castells (2007) terms "mass self-communication," helping to bring forth a new form of civil society. "The diffusion of Internet, mobile communication, digital media, and a variety of tools of social software," he observes, "have prompted the development of horizontal networks of interactive communication that connect local and global in chosen time" (Castells, 2007). The familiar dynamics of top-down, one-way message distribution associated

with the mainstream media are being effectively, albeit unevenly, pluralised. Ordinary citizens are appropriating new technological means (such as digital Wifi and Wmax) and forms (SMS, email, IPTV, video streaming, blogs, Vlogs, podcasts, Wikis, and so forth) in order to build their own networked communities, and in so doing are mounting an acute challenge to institutionalised power relations across the breadth of the "network society" (Castells, 2000; Allan & Matheson, 2004).

For Castells, this conception of "mass self-communication" highlights the ways in which these horizontal networks are rapidly converging with major media institutions. He writes:

It is mass communication because it reaches potentially a global audience through the p2p networks and Internet connection. It is multimodal, as the digitization of content and advanced social software, often based on open source that can be downloaded free, allows the reformatting of almost any content in almost any form, increasingly distributed via wireless networks. And it is self-generated in content, self-directed in emission, and self-selected in reception by many that communicate with many. We are indeed in a new communication realm, and ultimately in a new medium, whose backbone is made of computer networks, whose language is digital, and whose senders are globally distributed and globally interactive (Castells, 2007).

In this way, Castells usefully elucidates the countervailing ethos helping to shape the contours of this communicative terrain. While recognising the technological imperatives driving convergence, he takes care to acknowledge that a given medium does not determine message content, let alone its impact, in linear zero-sum terms. Rather, he draws attention to the ways in which communication flows "construct, and reconstruct every second the global and local production of meaning in the public mind" in diverse, intensely contested, social domains. Thus, "the emerging public space, rooted in communication, is not predetermined in its form by any kind of historical fate or technological necessity. It will be the result of the new stage of the oldest struggle in humankind: the struggle to free our minds" (Castells, 2007).

In taking Castells's intervention as its conceptual point of departure, this chapter offers an analysis of one instance of "mass self-communication," namely the website WikiLeaks. Founded in 2006 by Australian internet activist Julian Paul Assange and a combination of "Chinese dissidents, journalists, mathematicians, and start-up company technologists from the United States, Taiwan, Europe, Australia, and South Africa," WikiLeaks aimed to facilitate an anonymous electronic drop box for whistleblowers. Funded by voluntary donations from its readers, the site seeks to publish leaked documents from dissident individuals or communities in order to "expose oppressive regimes" and foster "better government and stronger democracies" by bringing about "transparency in government activities" (WikiLeaks, 2008). Over the years, especially after it published a series of scoops that shook the US government in 2010, WikiLeaks has promoted the cause of investigative journalism, organising citizens into a powerful force of news-gatherers, and laying bare a wealth of privileged information. By first disrupting and then decentralising relations of power, WikiLeaks encourages new ways of thinking. "It is only when a set of alternative values becomes visible in the realm of socialized communication (the communication process with the capacity to relate to society at large)," Castells (2010) contends, "that we can see a symptom of a transformative process with the potential of rewiring human minds."

This chapter, in considering WikiLeaks as an example of socialized communication, will explore the website's capacity to empower ordinary members of the "network society" to respond to the information politics of nation states and their institutions. At the heart of this process, we shall