



WikiLeaks, the State, and Middle-Aged Media

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Flash Quiz:

What do WikiLeaks' narcissist-in-chief and the United States Navy have in common?

Flash Answer:

Apart from a fascination with diplomatic cables and media attention, they're both interested in trademarks.

Julian Assange, avowedly a critic of the state, seeks its protection to control the use of his name in what he calls "public speaking" and "entertainment" (Halliday, 2011). He has sought this protection through the splendidly Dickensian law firm, Finers Stephens Innocent²—an aptly 19th-century name for a very traditional business, working on behalf of a very traditional person, craving very traditional state aid, with each party having embarked on a search for secondary accumulation.

The U.S. Navy wants similar ownership, of the expression "A Global Force for Good™."³ Since 2009, it has orchestrated a multimedia recruiting and public relations campaign around these words, as opposed to its previous slogan, which promised young people that the Navy would "Accelerate Your Life." Examples of this newly beneficent, though no doubt still speedy, work are offered in television commercials that show Navy personnel capturing Somali pirates, treating Haitian earthquake survivors, and handing toys to impoverished children. But there is always another side to this notion. An unbridled nationalism rides side-saddle with civil society mythology. The Navy twins these duties via its trite but revealing slogan, "First to Fight, First to Help" and insists that "The strength and status of any nation can be measured in part by the will and might of its navy" (United States Navy, n.d.).

These two highly state-dependent entities, the narcissist-in-chief and the Navy, have something else in common. They rely on the *bourgeois* media. The Navy craves advertising space and friendly coverage. WikiLeaks craves coverage and knowledge, because it lacks people who know what to make of

¹ Thanks to Anne-Marie O'Connor and Bill Booth for putting me onto the story.

² Later renamed HowardKennedyFSI.com.

³ Yes, the Navy has sought to trademark "Global Force for Good" (Ewing, 2009).

the materials it collects, and needs its texts to be scrutinized, authenticated, legitimized, promoted, and released by the middle-aged media, who do much more than add second-order meaning—though they do offer a great deal of it. At the same time, WikiLeaksers dedicate vast amounts of time and energy to decrying the middle-aged media and the state—the two entities whose attention they most desire.

A clue to this logocentric interdependency on despised others comes in Dan Kennedy's (2010) poignant question: "Why would an organisation as independent-minded and disdainful of the traditional media as WikiLeaks . . . seek out those very media as partners rather than going it alone?" One might ask the same of the armed forces and their well-known horror of investigative or negative reporting.

It's shocking to compare the narcissist-in-chief to the military-industrial complex, isn't it? WikiLeaksers are prone to an anti-state, anti-corporate, Schumpeter-lite cyberbarbarism. These chorines of technological determinism, personal anarchy, and the technological sublime pile out of business class and onto the jetway to tell us what we want and believe. They waltz moistly through a Marxist/Godardian wet dream where people fish, film, fornicate, and finance from morning to midnight. In this beguiling nocturnal fantasy, contemporary media technologies obliterate geography, sovereignty, and hierarchy in an alchemy of truth and beauty. A deregulated, individuated media world makes consumers into producers, frees the disabled from confinement, encourages new subjectivities, rewards intellect and competitiveness, links people across cultures, and allows billions of flowers to bloom in a post-political cornucopia (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). The Navy could not seem further distant from this world of carbon-splaying cosmopolitanism.

Some true believers have gone so far as to compare WikiLeaks with the heroic release of the Pentagon Papers 40 years earlier. This is part of that bizarre double-declutching that cyberbarbarians undertake, such that WikiLeaksers deserve to be treated as middle-aged media, even as they are allegedly entirely different creatures (Benkler, 2011; Hernández, 2011).

A paradox lies at the base of this movement, and it links unlikely roommates in WikiLeaks and the U.S. Navy. About 30 years ago, Foucault identified coin-operated think tanks like the American Enterprise Institute as the intellectual hand servants of neoliberalism, while also recognizing that these vocalists of a "permanent criticism of government policy" (2008, p. 247) actually sought permanent influence *over* that policy, because markets were their privileged "interface of government and the individual" (ibid., p. 253). He explained that neoliberalism governed populations through market imperatives, invoking and training them as ratiocinative liberal actors waiting for their inner creativity to be unlocked. Consumption was turned on its head: Everyone was creative, no one was simply a spectator, and we were all manufacturing pleasure while witnessing activities we had paid to watch. Internally divided—but happily so—each person was "a consumer on the one hand, but . . . also a producer" (ibid., p. 226). WikiLeaksers are neoliberals kneading/needling-the-state *par excellence*, their narcissist-in-chief a prime example of desire for his allegedly despised other, while the U.S. military benefits from the duplicity of being outside the discourse of government, even as it embodies and services the nation's imperialism.

Of course, one enjoyable aspect of WikiLeaks has been the *entrée* it has given ordinary mortals into the diurnal doings of international men and women of mystery. Diplomatic materials that generally

become available to historians of democracies some 50 years after the fact, and frequently in redacted form, have fallen into our collective lap spontaneously, products of the folly of an intranet available to millions of U.S. government workers, the majority of whom are not schooled in the ways and means of statecraft:

In a sense, the “colossal” WikiLeaks disclosures can be explained as the consequence of the dramatic spread of IT [information technology] use, together with the dramatic drop in its costs, including for the storage of millions of documents. Another contributing factor is the fact that safekeeping state and corporate secrets—never mind private ones—has become difficult in an age of instant reproducibility and dissemination. WikiLeaks becomes symbolic for a transformation in the “information society” at large, holding up a mirror of things to come. So while one can look at WikiLeaks as a (political) project and criticize it for its *modus operandi*, it can also be seen as the “pilot” phase in an evolution towards a far more generalized culture of anarchic exposure, beyond the traditional politics of openness and transparency. (Lovink & Riemens, 2010)

For a moment, WikiLeaks destabilized the semiprivate world of international relations, of oleaginous schmoozing at cocktail parties, notes taken on napkins, conspirators briefed behind cupped hands, and gossip exchanged about health and sex—in short, an insiders’ club. WikiLeaks made private diplomacy public. In the process, they compromised the propaganda of official public diplomacy (Barber, 2010).

Much of the content of the cables emphasizes the pettiness, triviality, and shallowness of what passes in the United States for strategic analysis of international politics—a quaint mixture of self-interest and high moralism that is central to the way the country speaks of itself on the global stage, the parochial television screen, the think-tank lunch, and the university campus. The release of the cables to public scrutiny therefore placed a focus on U.S. nationalism, so evident in the rapidly vicious reactions from U.S. officials—conservatives and liberals alike—to having their insights and prose shared with commoners (*The Guardian*, 2010; United States Department of State, 2010).

But for some, such as the veteran Canadian diplomat Jeremy Kinsman, the cables disclose basically sound and rational statecraft: “The upshot is that diplomacy has been validated in the public mind, not just because U.S. diplomats seem to know what they are doing, but because the diplomatic track comes across as highly relevant.” He points out renewed interest among U.S. citizens in joining the diplomatic service (2011, p. 47). And 70% of the U.S. population favored exterminating the narcissist-in-chief because of the revelations (Kovel, 2011, p. 1). This can hardly have been WikiLeaks’ principal goal!

The scandal also foregrounds gender, as a consequence of the accusations of sexual violence made about the narcissist-in-chief (*Julian Assange v. Swedish Prosecution Authority*, 2011) and the queer stature of the leaker-in-chief (*Advocate.com* Editors, 2010). I am particularly exercised by the consequences for people’s lives, media coverage, and diplomacy of exposing the views of foreign policy professionals to the bright lights of narcissistic WikiLeaks. My brief case study concerns the U.S. embassy in Mexico and again touches on the *frottage* of sex and service.

Many of us share information that we do not wish to be made public with particular people and institutions, whether they are intimates or professionals, whether the topic is desire or disease. Sometimes, we are content to have the outcomes eventually made public, but not every word we have uttered and written along the way. Professional conversations and working documents necessarily involve some privacy. In the case of foreign affairs, the potential for embarrassment, legal action, violence, or the loss of special contacts is considerable (Page & Spence, 2011). No one could have acted faster or cried louder for the state's protection than the narcissist-in-chief when his desire to publish his memoirs went awry: "I own the copyright of the manuscript, which was written by Andrew O'Hagan. By publishing this draft against my wishes Canongate has acted in breach of contract, in breach of confidence, in breach of my creative rights and in breach of personal assurances" (Assange, 2011). So information isn't all meant to be free, is it?

We can see that the personal and the public can be unfortunately and uncomfortably intertwined, as per a former U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, the faithful imperial plenipotentiary Carlos Pascual (Nájar, 2011).

Pascual was forced to leave his post in 2011 after dual scandals hit. First, he was seen in public and at official functions dating a relative of the Partido Institucional Revolucionario's (PRI) Congressional leader. The PRI was one of the parties opposing the then-administration of the Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). The PRI held power in Mexico for decades until the PAN's hegemony began in 2000, and it regained the presidency in 2012. Second, WikiLeaks disclosed, in Cable 240473 of December 17, 2009, that Pascual had cast doubt on the value of PAN President Felipe Calderón's security forces as collaborators with the U.S. government in the struggle against *narcotraficantes*, claiming that they were averse to taking the risks required to win. When the cable was published, Calderón erupted in the media, deriding the U.S. ambassador's "ignorance." Pascual had to go. The WikiLeaksers were modest enough to issue a communiqué claiming responsibility for his demise (Nájar, 2011; Olson, 2011).

This matters a great deal in the current conjuncture, when the United States illegally exports guns to Mexico, Mexico illegally exports drugs to the United States, and the "Merida Initiative" has seen hundreds of millions of U.S. taxpayers' dollars flood into Mexico, as well as tens of thousands of taxpayers' cadavers buried there since 2008 as part of U.S. efforts to interdict drugs through militarization (Dolfos, 2011; Johnson, 2011; Nájar, 2011; Olson, 2011). WikiLeaks' role in the demise of a diplomat might have been in the public interest had it occasioned a debate over two core issues: first, privacy for officials' romantic lives; and second, the narco-militarization of Mexican life. It did neither. WikiLeaks lacked the tools to make it so, and the bourgeois media didn't care to do what was needed. Instead, a career was compromised, and a brutal policy was left unquestioned. But WikiLeaks got a communiqué and headlines. Meanwhile, the various drug-distribution cartels wage terror against one another as part of their own struggle for control of markets and regions. People are being murdered every day across vast swathes of the country in this conflict, and Mexico's government is regarded as a failed state by many locals (Dolfos, 2011; Johnson, 2011; Nájar, 2011; Olson, 2011).

Conclusion

What is the upshot of the WikiLeaks controversy? Diplomats still need to do something with the notes they have made on napkins or cell phones at cocktail parties; they still see themselves as a sacerdotal élite of the elect; and they still regard what they do as beyond the ken of ordinary people. But if the WikiLeaksers have achieved anything by their revelations, it is to disclose the triviality of this elect group's frequently soap-operatic, amateurish pronouncements on affairs of state. That has given an unlikely global audience insights into international relations—a form of studying up where ethnography turns its gaze upon the powerful, rather than the powerless (Nader, 1972).

At the same time, it is problematic to announce the narcissist-in-chief as "the modern figurehead for a new world order defined by openness, transparency and Internet freedom" (Krotoski, 2011). WikiLeaks echoes the very pomposity and secrecy of the states it seeks to expose, and it is comfortably bounded within old-fashioned Western liberal norms and foci:

In the ongoing saga called "The Decline of the US Empire," WikiLeaks enters the stage as the slayer of a soft target. It would be difficult to imagine it being able to inflict quite the same damage to the Russian or Chinese governments, or even to the Singaporean—not to mention their "corporate" affiliates. In Russia or China, huge cultural and linguistic barriers are at work, not to speak of purely power-related ones, which would need to be surmounted. Vastly different constituencies are also factors there, even if we are speaking about the narrower (and allegedly more global) cultures and agendas of hackers, info-activists and investigative journalists. In that sense, WikiLeaks in its present manifestation remains a typically "western" product and cannot claim to be a truly universal or global undertaking. (Lovink & Riemens, 2010)

At the same time, the U.S. Navy's and WikiLeaks' anal desire for control of intellectual property performs a revelatory mirroring function. Logocentrically interdependent on its other, WikiLeaks is clearly an exercise in mimetic desire, as the narcissist-in-chief and his acolytes model themselves on the clandestine actions and property protections that characterize the very bourgeois state they profess to oppose.

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