

# Leaky Revelations

## Commitments in Exposing Militarism

by Brian Rappert

Contests over the control of information are central to the perpetuation and critique of militarism. This article examines one of the most prominent sets of state document leaks in recent political history: the online posting of hundreds of thousands of US war logs and diplomatic cables by WikiLeaks. Bold statements were advanced in 2010 and afterward regarding what these releases made visible. In contrast, this article considers how disclosure and nondisclosure came bundled together. With reference to the tensions of keeping secrets and producing transparency, I suggest that the promise attached to the released documents did not just derive from the argument that they revealed modern statecraft, nor that such knowledge was tantalizingly out of reach, but from the manner in which what had been rendered knowable could be revisited over time. Through this argument I want to explore the affective knots, conceptual tangles, and problematic story lines associated with exposing militarism.

The control of information is often regarded as central to the continuance of militarism. As a result, much potential is typically invested in breaches of military and diplomatic secrecy, and much allure can surround the exposure of military and diplomatic activities. For those seeking to reveal the machinations of militarism, the disclosure of once sequestered information is often regarded as a vital basis for critique, whereas for those working to defend military maneuvers from scrutiny, information is often treated as a stockpile that needs to be secluded. Given such investments, when breaches take place, their meaning and relevance are often disputed.

This article examines the rhetoric and tensions of such contests. It does so through considering one of the most prominent instances of the unauthorized disclosure of information in recent political history: the online posting of US war logs and diplomatic cables by WikiLeaks. The intrigues of conflict have long been a matter of dread, fascination, and enigma. As an organization dedicated to the anonymous online posting of corporate and state documents, since its founding WikiLeaks has sought to bring to the global population materials that were previously only accessible to a limited coterie. As part of the series of releases in 2010 examined in this article, WikiLeaks collaborated with prominent newspapers to raise attention to topics that could hardly be more significant for understanding aspects of modern militarism centered on the United States: thousands upon thousands of civilian deaths from conflict, a new “Great Game” afoot, intelligence gathering on friend and foe alike, and government participation in torture.

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These leaks were widely billed as enabling a clear and sometimes unprecedented view into the workings of dimly lit corridors of power. The documents released provided not only the building blocks for popular media accounts at the time about how warfighting gets done but also subsequent academic scholarship setting out the nature of US information-gathering networks (e.g., Bickel et al. 2014; Frampton and Rosen 2013) and the inability of the US executive branch to maintain the kinds of tight information controls it sought (e.g., Fenster 2014).

If moving from the leaked documents to the truth was sometimes presented as a short step by members and supporters of WikiLeaks, so too sometimes was moving from truth to power. The “radical transparency” philosophy underpinning WikiLeaks developed by its founder Julian Assange was premised on the idea that freely disclosing material on the web in a manner not controlled by entrenched institutions would challenge hierarchies of authority and therefore further democratic relations (Sánchez Estop 2014). As many have argued, the leaked material has been marshaled as part of efforts to create new relations of democratic accountability (e.g., BBC Two 2012b; Sifry 2011).

Rather than using the leaks as an empirical resource for grounding arguments about the realities of contemporary statecraft, I take as my topic the issue of how the material was positioned. Stated differently, the focus is not so much on what the leaks tell us but, rather, the preliminary matter of how the logs and cables were made to tell. Questions for consideration include: How were the logs and cables put forward as (non-)revelatory insights into US militarism? How did those organizations collaborating in the leaks attempt to advance themselves as authoritative interpreters of the logs and cables? How were claims to truth reformulated over time? By examining these questions, we will be able to explore the assumptions and commitments that often inform (critical) analyses of militarism.

In making this argument, I take inspiration from anthropological approaches that conceptualize keeping secrets as a matter of analyzing how they get told—that is, who tells what, when, to whom, and how (e.g., Bellmen 1981; De Jong 2007; Taussig 1999). In other words, the focus is with the process of secrecy rather than the content of secrets.

The structure is as follows: with a focus on Iraqi civilian deaths, the next section elaborates how, as leaked secrets, the logs and cables were often treated as possessing a readily accessible, self-evident, and definite meaning. Importantly, though, these were not the only orientations within news analyses by those organizations under study in this article. As the third section (“Stories behind the Stories”) details, treatments of the logs and cables as accessible, evident, and definite in meaning mixed and melded with reference to that which was not known, to what was inaccessible and not publicly appreciated, etc. These evocations challenged the status of the logs and cables and unsettled who could speak for them. A further notable feature about the WikiLeaks revelations developed in the fourth section (“Openings”) was that they were not just the topic of news stories in 2010, but they have been subject to a series of “stories behind the stories” by individuals central to the online postings. Through books, films, and documentaries, these behind-the-scenes accounts included commentary on what was missing in the 2010 coverage of the leaks. Yet, this revisiting was not done in such a way as to undermine the previous claims made by the same commentators. Moving into more general analytical considerations associated with the intertwining of concealment and disclosure, the discussion section considers how the revelatory potential of the logs and cables was renewed over time by collaborators.

### The Presence of Leaks

In the years that followed WikiLeaks becoming a household name, the composition, rationale, and history of the organization would become contested between those (formerly) within it as well as those outside of it. As basic background, though, WikiLeaks was established in 2006 under the direction of Julian Assange. While initially seeking to post hacked materials online, it developed into an organization dedicated to publishing materials sourced from other parties (Beckett and Ball 2012). WikiLeaks posted its first document in the year of its foundation. This article, though, examines releases in 2010. During that year, WikiLeaks released arguably its three most significant batches of documents. The US National Security Advisor at the time of the writing of this article previously characterized the material released as incomparable in all of “human history” (Bolton 2012)—at least human history up to that point in time. This is a summary of the documents:

*Afghan War Logs.* In July, WikiLeaks posted some 91,000 US military reports dated between 2004 and 2009. These field reports were composed by soldiers and intelligence officers and pertained to topics such as the civilian casualties from NATO forces and attacks against the Coalition by the Taliban. Wiki-

Leaks initially collaborated with the newspaper the *Guardian*, which then led to further collaborations with the *New York Times* and *Der Spiegel* in both analyzing and publicizing the material.

*Iraq War Logs.* In October 2010, some 400,000 US documents related to the war in Iraq were released, consisting of daily Significant Activity Reports detailing the outcome of use of force incidents. Again, this was done in collaboration with the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, and *Der Spiegel*.

*Diplomatic cables.* In November 2010, WikiLeaks posted a subset of the 251,287 diplomatic cables sent by US embassies. *El País*, *Le Monde* joined the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, and *Der Spiegel* in analyzing the documents, with additional cables released in piecemeal fashion thereafter.

In this article, I sketch the ways claims were constructed on the basis of these releases, through content reference to news stories including the term “WikiLeaks” in the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*, published during the period of July 2010–June 2011; official US statements on the 2010 leaks; and a small number of other major investigative analyses.<sup>1</sup> The method employed was as follows: all of the news reports and US official government statements pertaining to WikiLeaks during these time periods were read to understand them as a whole without preconceived categories. Through this qualitative review, the contrasting orientations to the definitiveness and the accessibility of the meaning of the logs and cables was determined to be a noteworthy theme. I then identified key concepts and phrasing in the texts reviewed, associated with the definitiveness of claims made about US statecraft. Through an inductive process of reasoning, the examples of these contrasting wordings were organized into two general patterns of discourse that are elaborated in this section and the next one.

In reading these news stories, one notable theme was how participating media outlets repeatedly insisted that the leaked documents opened up hidden areas of diplomacy and national security. *The Guardian* newspaper made fairly assured arguments along these lines. The article “Iraq War Logs Reveal 15,000 Previously Unlisted Civilian Deaths” began by stating:

Leaked Pentagon files obtained by the *Guardian* contain details of more than 100,000 people killed in Iraq following the US-led invasion, including more than 15,000 deaths that were previously unrecorded . . . The mass of leaked documents provides the first detailed tally by the US military of Iraqi fatalities. Troops on the ground filed secret field reports over six years of the occupation, purporting to tot up every casualty, military and civilian. (Leigh 2010b)

The 15,000 unrecorded-deaths number in this quote referred to civilian deaths not previously identified through the individual-by-individual tally of civilian deaths by Iraq Body Count (2010)—a total largely derived through tallying up deaths specified in English-language news accounts. Another

1. For wider analysis of media coverage of WikiLeaks, see Hindman and Thomas (2014) and Mabon (2013).

article titled “WikiLeaks Iraq: Data Journalism Maps Every Death” included these figures for deaths between 2004 and 2009:

Total deaths

- The database [of Significant Activity Reports] records 109,032 deaths in total for the period
- The database records the following death counts: 66,081 civilians, 23,984 insurgents and 15,196 Iraqi security forces. (Rogers 2010b).

As part of the online version of the articles, readers could download spreadsheet log details on “every death in Iraq.” On the back of the quoted figures, in his book *WikiLeaks and the Age of Transparency*, Micah Sifry (2011:34) contended that the Iraq War Logs “revealed that the Pentagon had lied about not keeping accurate records of the Iraqi death toll from the war and that the casualty total was perhaps 15,000 persons larger than the numbers previously made public.”

Likewise, at times, the diplomatic cables were said to enable an “unvarnished picture” of the decisions, motivations, and duplicities of the government (*New York Times* 2010). In contrast to such definitive critical condemnations of US policy and practice, some political pundits and officials—such as former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton—contended that the cables clearly illustrated how little there was by way of misdeeds or a split between the public face and backroom dealings of diplomats (e.g., Rachman 2010; Zakaria 2010).

Whatever the evaluation, the leaked material was repeatedly attached with the qualities of sufficiency and literalness. The thinking of officials and the deeds of security personnel were recorded in the logs and cables, and these had come into view. Treating them as such then enabled commentators to debate questions such as, Did the logs and cables provide a damning indictment of US activities or not? Did they say anything new or not? It also set the stage for some of those involved to represent the publication of the leaked material as another round of the “eternal battle between those in power, with an interest in controlling information, and the journalist and citizen who wants it to be free” (Beckett and Ball 2012:91). In the manner that comprehension followed from disclosure, one way we can characterize the logs and cables is as “transparent” data: this in the sense of “transparent” referring to what is manifest, in plain sight, and easy to perceive. In the language of the field of information theory (Floridi 2014), the releases were depicted as having the status of “information,” that is, as well-formed, meaningful, and truthful data. Commentators advanced positions (albeit ones offering opposing conclusions) in which the leaks were portrayed as speaking for themselves rather than any supplementary explanations and evidence being required.

With such a factual status, the leaked material could enable seeing through the obfuscations of officialdom. For instance, the record of a private diplomatic meeting given through the cables (e.g., notes of meeting with the Kazakh ambassador to Washington) was treated as a way to get “beyond the public statements and official platitudes” (BBC Two 2012b). What

was said in private (as revealed by the leaked material) served as a basis for establishing what diplomats “really say behind closed doors.” At times, then, an exceptional status was granted to the leaked material, as if it provided a definitive view into diplomats’ or others’ inner thoughts. Such an orientation also came with assumptions about how statecraft works in practice. To maintain a distinction between commonplace public appearances and private realities as revealed by the leaks assumes that the kinds of “strategic interaction” (Goffman 1970) associated with statecraft—the moves (and countermoves and counter-countermoves) by individuals to influence each other and manage self-images—effectively end in certain situations. Whereas the public persona of an official can assume multiple faces, the presumption made was that once office doors are shut, the real one emerges.<sup>2</sup> Instead of understanding the cables as records of conversations influenced by (i) the fears, priorities, and perspectives of officials within a state, (ii) the demands of the setting in which they were made, or (iii) the differential power relations between states, they were taken as uncontrived. In this way it might be said, then, that in the stories, on occasion, the leaked material was treated as more than just transparent. Instead, we can characterize their treatment as one of being pristine; that is to say that the information given could stand alone, did not require other information to account for its meaning, and could directly speak to what took place.

### Beyond the Leaks

Contentions that the logs and cables put the facts out there for all to view granted them a self-sufficiency, but such attributions stood somewhat uncomfortably with the human voice that presented them. Unless reports, investigators, and commentators simply mouthed the words written in the logs and cables in their reporting, then human agency—skill, judgment, interpretation—mattered in how the leaks were assessed.

Scholars of discourse have long indicated how the place of expertise is negotiated in relation to the immediacy, obviousness, and accessibility of information (e.g., Cole 1998). For instance, Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) examined how scientists characterized claims to knowledge through the use of contrasting repertoires. In a so-called empiricist repertoire, scientists’ claims were presented as natural, self-evident outcomes of careful study. Yet, this way of portraying science common in professional publications mixed with a contingent repertoire more prevalent in informal settings. In the contingent repertoire, “scientists presented their actions and beliefs as heavily dependent on speculative insights, prior intellectual commitments, personal characteristics, indescribable skills, social ties and group membership” (Gilbert and Mulkay 1984:56). Gilbert and Mulkay argued that understanding how debates over truth develop and eventually get settled (or not) required minding how such repertoires interrelate.

2. For a consideration of how charges of duplicity generate attempts to resolve identity into a single face, see Nelson (2009).

In a similar vein, it is readily possible to propose varied discursive orientations within the analysis of the logs and cables. For example, a two-part television series, *WikiLeaks: The Secret Life of a Superpower* (BBC Two 2012a, 2012b)—self-dubbed “the first in-depth television analysis of the secret cables”—included repeated and explicit claims proposing that the cables spoke for themselves in the revelatory spirit of the previous section. Thus it was said that “The cables reveal what American diplomats say when they think the world will never know who they trust and who they mock, what they want and how they get it.” Over three dozen assertions were made that “The cables showed,” “The cables revealed,” or “The cables allow us to see.” In only a few instances were explicit qualifications of any sort inserted, such as that “The cables seemed to suggest.”

And yet, despite the many references to the face-value meaning of the cables in *WikiLeaks: The Secret Life of a Superpower*, at times it also spoke to a not readily apparent meaning alongside the apparent one. While much ground for criticism of US foreign policy was said to be evidenced by what the cables revealed, the presenter also spoke of reasons for praise in the work of officials:

The cables reveal aspects of US diplomacy that America did not want us to see. But the *real* story of the cables is more complicated. These *secret* documents show US diplomats apparently trying to do good. In country after country, even behind closed doors, they are raising issues like freedom, democracy and human rights . . . And yet, the cables show a real tension in US diplomacy. The US wants to spread its ideals across the world, but struggles to reconcile this with its other interests, like protecting some of its unsavory alliances. (BBC Two 2012a; emphasis in delivery)

This third layer, the real story of struggle, was only made evident in the documentary through the in-depth analysis of the cables, enabled by interviews and other forms of supplementary evidence. Within programs such as *WikiLeaks: The Secret Life of a Superpower*, then, the leaked material both spoke the truth and needed to be spoken for (see, as well, Khalili and Smith 2010).

Relatedly, within the reports by the *Guardian* and the *New York Times* as well as by members of WikiLeaks itself, the need for “context” was sometimes said to be necessary to make sense of the logs and cables.<sup>3</sup> While an individual cable—indicating, for instance, the shipment of missiles by North Korea to Iran—might seem to have a definite significance at first sight, the situation could prove otherwise through the “wider window” enabled by further journalistic investigation and expertise (Mazzetti and Broad 2010). Of course, verifying, identifying, contextualizing, and otherwise analyzing information are often regarded as the hallmarks of journalism and the source of its authority. What is noteworthy in the case of WikiLeaks is that attention to

3. For instance, in Baker (2010) and in comments made by Julian Assange in *Mediastan* (at 14:00). For analyses suggesting the importance of context in WikiLeaks reporting, see Roberts (2012) and Coddington (2014).

such tradecraft rested uneasily with the frequent emphasis on how the once-secret documents clearly told their own story.

In the ways the logs and cables had to be set aside in order to get to what really took place, we can characterize them as transparent in another (and opposing) sense of the term than the one outlined in the second section. This sense of “transparent” refers to what is to be “seen through.” In line with Teurlings and Stauff’s (2014) analysis of the making of transparency, rather than providing some unmediated access to what really took place, what the logs showed had to be made sense of by intermediaries, individuals whose representations were open to question.

As an additional dimension of the varied ways of making sense of the leaked material, it is possible to identify two different senses of the leaks as raw data within the examined media coverage, approaches that mirror longstanding cultural categorical oppositions. They were treated as raw in the sense of providing a graphic, unspun, and unadulterated (and thus providing a highly insightful “raw look at US diplomacy” [e.g., Shane and Lehren 2010]). Here the cables could be drawn on in a literal way for what they showed, since they were endowed with authenticity by virtue of their status as leaked documents. In contrast, though, they were also treated as raw in the sense of being crude, rough, and unprocessed. On the day of the Afghan War Diary release, for instance, the *Guardian* ran a front-page story titled “Massive Leak of Secret Files Exposes True Afghan War.” This took the war logs as detailing “a blow-by-blow account of the fighting.” Other stories by that newspaper on that same day used the logs to provide an “unvarnished picture” of the conflict, yet also noted that the log entries were poor quality, uncorroborated, incomplete, written in a cryptic language, simply false, or subject to other caveats (*Guardian* 2010; Leigh 2010a). Such deficiencies were not said to render the logs completely useless. However, they did demand additional skilled journalistic reporting to uncover which facts they supported.

In the case of WikiLeaks, the tension over whether the leaked material spoke the truth on its own also stemmed from there being so much of it. The 2010 releases encompassed hundreds of thousands of documents. There were data “in spades. With bells on” (Rogers 2010a). As such, not only did the content of the logs make the news in 2010, but sometimes so did the production of the news stories from them. Processing this amount of material was said by *Guardian* reporters to require nonconventional skills associated with the then-emerging field of data journalism (the acquisition, analysis, and presentation of large data sets to support journalism), lest the sheer volume of it confound sense making.

The manner in which treatments of the logs and cables as accessible, evident, and definite mixed with treatments of them as involving what was inaccessible, unappreciated, and indefinite tied in with contentions about the distribution of epistemic competencies. At times, for instance, the negotiation of expertise in relation to data analysis moved between devolution and deference. In the case of the Afghan War Diary, for instance, the

*Guardian* created two web-based data journalism resources: a set of 300 significant incidents and a set of the logs related to improvised explosive devices. For both, a graphic interface was produced to enable readers to call up individual logs. For those that wanted to go a step further—“to download this data to play with it yourself” (Rogers 2010a)—Excel spreadsheets were compiled. Thus, not only could readers see how the numbers of improvised explosive device attacks per year and by location have fluctuated, but they could conduct their own analysis. Indeed, one report appealed to readers in asking, “Can you help us make more sense of the raw info?” (Rogers 2010a).

Offering a response to this question would seem tricky in relation to the very terms in which it was reported. One reason for this is that cross-checks done by reporters at the *Guardian* and others on the Afghan logs were said (albeit in another article) to indicate the wounded in action (WIA) and killed in action (KIA) entries in the reports were “highly unreliable” (Leigh 2010c). Such appraisals, especially without further details, frustrated knowing how to make sense of the logs as “raw info.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, as explicitly acknowledged, the logs that were included within the data journalism resources at the *Guardian* only represented a small portion of the overall leaked documents. This made it problematic to situate specific incidents within the “overall context” or “wider window” provided by the totality of the releases. Thus while readers were asked to make more sense of the “raw info,” they were also directed back to reporters and data journalists who had been able to check, identify, contextualize, and otherwise analyze the logs.

Other examples can be identified whereby what was presented as made available through the leaked material was simultaneously bound up with what was missing from it in ways that seemingly unsettled what could be known. For instance, the sense that the leaked material was “out there” and visible for all to see took on a graphic form. *The Guardian* used the Iraq military logs as a data set for geographically pinpointing the location of fatalities in an online map as part of a news story titled “WikiLeaks Iraq Logs: Every Death Mapped” (Rogers 2010b). Two days after the initial publication of the leaks, an American academic with existing access to log data pointed to various practical limitations with how and when the logs were filled in—considerations that were said by the *Guardian* to lead to the underreporting of deaths (Rogers 2010c).<sup>5</sup>

Much more was at stake in the reporting of the figures than the possibility of poor completion of the logs, though. Notably, the logs only related to deaths directly resulting from violence associated with armed intervention by the Multinational Force. Indirectly, though, conflicts kill through denying or disturbing access to health care, food, and clean water; by fueling criminal

activity; and by undermining individuals’ psychological and physical well-being. In terms of the total burden of armed conflict, direct deaths typically only represent a fraction of indirect ones (Geneva Declaration Secretariat 2008).

No mention was made of this distinction as part of the *Guardian* Iraq War Logs coverage. The only allusion at the time to the question of which deaths count as part of mapping “every death” was made through a brief reference in one *Guardian* article. The total figure derived from the logs was said to be “far lower than another widely quoted estimate of more than 650,000 ‘excess deaths’ extrapolated on a different basis and published in a 2006 study in the *Lancet*” (Leigh 2010b).<sup>6</sup> No elaboration was given to the meaning of “excess deaths.” What is noteworthy, though, is that this term refers not to direct combat deaths but to the far more expansive notion of how many more Iraqis in total had died (for whatever reason) than would have done so in the absence of the 2003 invasion.

After the launch of the Iraqi War Logs, the initial reports from the newspapers collaborating with WikiLeaks would be picked up elsewhere and translated into arguments about who knew what and said what, the legitimacy of the invasion, and total casualty figures (e.g., Burchell 2012; Hider 2012; White 2010). While some reports of the WikiLeaks Iraq War Logs investigated in detail the methodological basis for disputes (e.g., Reynolds 2010), most gave such matters very little or no elaboration. Instead, glosses of the issues at hand were given using (in this context) ambiguous terms such as “civilian deaths” or “Iraqis.”

In noting the considerations of the previous three paragraphs, it is possible to suggest how the terms used in accounts of what was revealed through the logs set their own trap door regarding what omissions lay within them—or at least for those people able to bring forth a sense of what was missing. Unless what is disclosed at any one point in time can be taken as providing a (for all purposes) complete disclosure, then questions can be asked about what is being left out and how that affects the understanding of what was divulged. In relation to the topic of civilian deaths in Iraq, it is difficult to imagine what an “adequate” or “complete” disclosure could be in light of the lack of shared or even specified purposes for the death figures. Depending on whether they are meant to memorialize suffering of innocents, judge the morality of force, establish assistance and reconstruction requirements, assess the effectiveness of operations, or simply acknowledge loss, then determinations about what should be said and with what detail can easily diverge. Yet recognition of this purpose dependency was not often aired in the 2010 news coverage of the WikiLeaks Iraq War Logs (or, for that matter, in wider political disputes about Iraqi deaths [Rappert 2012]).

6. As opposed to the Iraq Body Count that tallied individual reports of deaths, the *Lancet* study employed cluster statistical sampling techniques coupled with a baseline morality rate to estimate how many more Iraqis died than would have died in the absence of the war.

4. Despite such caveats, this data set has been treated as a “detailed insider’s description of the military machinery of the world’s largest power,” one taken as “a reliable description of the Afghan war” based on said “systematic verification efforts” at the *New York Times*. See Zammit-Mangion et al. (2012:12416).

5. Underreporting was also noted elsewhere, as in Leigh (2010b).

## Stories behind the Stories

The manner in which disclosure can create a sense of what has been undisclosed as yet is underscored by the “stories behind the stories” about WikiLeaks. Starting from 2011, these were produced by those central to the 2010 revelations in books, documentaries, and films. For instance, Daniel Domscheit-Berg’s *Inside WikiLeaks* invited readers into the “explosive exposé of the inner workings of the whistle-blowing phenomenon.”<sup>7</sup> Individuals at the collaborating newspapers examined in this article also came out with book-length volumes (*WikiLeaks: Inside Julian Assange’s War on Secrecy* by David Leigh and Luke Harding at the *Guardian*—hereafter, “*WikiLeaks*”—as well as *Open Secrets* by the *New York Times*). A story behind the story was then also presented in the documentary *Mediastan* as well as the feature film *Fifth Estate* that drew on the books by Domscheit-Berg as well as Leigh and Harding. These narratives were in addition to other outputs with more or less direct collaboration with WikiLeaks members. This includes Laura Poitras’s film *Risk*. Another set of notable collaborative publications included “Julian Assange’s” *Julian Assange: The Unauthorised Autobiography* (2011) as well as its ghostwriters’ version of the story behind this quasi-autobiography behind the story (O’Hagan 2014).

In seeking to make previously undisclosed considerations known, each story behind the story intertextually traded on there having been something absent from previous coverage. Much of this novelty related to the “texture, nuance, and drama” (Keller 2011:18)—definitely drama—of personalities and events. This included the cloak-and-dagger intrigue of the dealings between newspaper organizations and Julian Assange, the perception of power and paranoia that developed with the handling of thousands upon thousands of classified documents, the manner in which WikiLeaks as a fledgling organization projected an inflated image of itself to the world, the practices by which journalists both hoard and share data, the manner in which WikiLeaks internally descended into a personality cult, and so forth.

More relevant to the themes of this article, the inside stories also unsettled the factual status of what had been claimed in 2010 by organizations collaborating in the release of the logs and cables. For instance, accounts of the story of the leaks by staff from the *Guardian* and the *New York Times* cited numerous limitations to the logs and cables, arguably in a starker and more extended manner than in their 2010 news reports. The cables, for instance, were said not only to be subject to qualification about their reliability but also to be restricted in the overall picture they painted because “top secret” or higher-classified cables were not in the set of documents WikiLeaks obtained (Keller 2011:14). In addition, the cables’ authors were deemed to have agendas—to impress others, to promote their views, and to ensure their jobs—so that what was written should not be taken at face value (Leigh and Harding 2011:143–

7. From the back cover of Domscheit-Berg (2011).

144). And yet, such failings mixed in a seemingly tension ridden way with the refrain also given in these stories behind the stories that the cables themselves provided “an unprecedented look at back-room bargaining by embassies around the world, brutally candid views of foreign leaders and frank assessments of nuclear and terrorist threats” (Shane and Lehren 2010:54). Such problems also sat seemingly uneasily with the inclusion of numerous reproduced cables for readers to pour over without instruction, qualification, or context in *WikiLeaks* and *Open Secrets*.

As another instance of how the inside stories unsettled what had been made known previously, one of the *Guardian*’s reporters (Simon Rogers) was quoted by colleagues in *WikiLeaks* as stating in relation to the Afghan War Diary that, “In future, data journalism may not seem amazing and new; for now it is. The world has changed and it is data that has changed it” (Leigh and Harding 2011:107). As the authors of *WikiLeaks* went on, “One obvious opportunity was to obtain genuine statistics of casualties for the first time. But to do so Rogers and his reporter colleagues had to grapple with realities on the military ground: those realities made apparently enticing datasets into dirty and unreliable statistics” (107). This unreliability was the result of realities such as the filling in of the logs by units to varying degrees and manners; the difficulties of counting deaths in combat situations; and the belief that combatant death counts were sometimes exaggerated and civilian ones intentionally undercounted. As a result, the authors of *WikiLeaks* then concluded:

So it was a tricky task to produce statistics that could be claimed to have real value. That highlighted once again the inescapable limitations of the purist WikiLeaks ideology. The material that resided in leaked documents, no matter how voluminous, was not “the truth.” It was just often a signpost pointing to some truth, requiring careful attention. (Leigh and Harding 2011:108)<sup>8</sup>

Just how statistics with real value could be produced from unreliable statistics by reporters was not elaborated in *WikiLeaks*, though. What *WikiLeaks* made even less certain was how readers of the *Guardian* invited by Simon Rogers to download Excel spreadsheets back in 2010 (as noted above) could have advanced the state of knowledge given the limitations said to be recognized at the time of the Afghan War Diary releases by those at the newspaper.<sup>9</sup>

In certain respects, the stories behind the stories queried expertise in a way missing in 2010 news reports by the collaborating organizations under scrutiny in this article. The prominence in places attached to the journalistic role in making sense of the leaked material—of what otherwise would be an “incomprehensible mass data dump” (Leigh and Harding

8. For another instance of how the leaks were said to only signal truth, including by Julian Assange, see Hermann and Moreira (2011).

9. For a later analysis by a collaborating partner, see Iraq Body Count (2010).

2011:100)<sup>10</sup>—provided space for directing attention to how varying claims were drawn from the logs and cables. Bill Keller, the former executive editor for the *New York Times*, questioned the *Guardian's* coverage of civilian deaths in Afghanistan, including whether logs proved that there were “hundreds of civilian deaths [from] unreported incidents” (Keller 2011:10).<sup>11</sup>

While such comments queried others' reporting, largely absent from the stories behind the stories were self-directed concerns. This was perhaps most vivid in relation to *WikiLeaks*. This book chronicled the newspaper's initial engagements, strained collaborations, and eventual estrangement from Julian Assange and WikiLeaks. In addition to being the authors of *WikiLeaks*, both David Leigh and Luke Harding played significant but ambiguous roles in the unfolding events retold. The book was written in a narrative third person format where actions by these two reporter-authors were discussed in just the same way as others in the “Cast of Characters” list provided at the start of the book (Leigh and Harding 2011:vii). The authors were even quoted (by themselves) in a journalistic third person fashion as offering eyewitness accounts of what happened. This narrative format was employed without attention to what this “self-reporting reporting” implied for the status and bounds of what was written in this story behind the stories.

Thus, while the stories behind the stories provided occasions for reconsidering what the leaks made available, this was done in circumscribed ways in relation to previous news reports. This meant claims about the logs and cables could be made anew without being encumbered by the need to square them with what was written back in 2010 by the same individuals.

## Openings

With its roots in Enlightenment ideals about the power of information and the corrosiveness of secrecy, the leaking of documents is one common strategy for exposing the maneuverings of statecraft. In this spirit, the 2010 releases by WikiLeaks have been praised by some scholars for realizing the virtuous goals of transparency (e.g., Pieterse 2012; Springer et al. 2012). In contrast, by attending the varied claims made on the back of the releases over time, this article has offered a different appreciation. Rather than treating absence and presence, immediacy and mediacy, or disclosure and concealment as opposite poles against which the leaks should be measured, I have asked how claims to both aspects of the pairings got packaged together in and between news reports, documentaries, and biographies.

Related themes have been prevalent in other examinations of disclosure and expertise. Kuntsman and Stein (2015) critically examined how social media have enabled militarism to be rendered both visible and invisible. Central to this has been

the manner in which new media forms help make militarism instantly available and yet banal. Wider than militarism itself, Coopmans's (2014) notion of “artful revelation” signaled the manner in which the promotion of data visualization software situationally traded on both the contention that this tool enabled patterns in data to be brought into sight while also making germane the need for skills, experience, and understanding to interpret visual analytics which, in turn, put the realization of real benefits of the software just out of the purview of would-be users.

In a similar vein of elaborating how expectations, belief, and skepticism come bundled together in what gets seen, Smith (2015) charted the rise of “modern” forms of conjuring entertainment magic in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Central to this type of magic was the shift away from elaborate stage props, dim lighting, and other devices that signaled the likely basis for deceptive effects—a move demanded by the increasing scientific sophistication of audiences. In its place, a naturalistic and realistic pretense emerged in which the apparatuses, props, and costumes for magic were presented as simple, ordinary, and minimalistic. Through this, audiences to acts understood as deceptive became engrossed, but not only because the methods and mechanisms of trickery were concealed from their sight. A second-order concealment took place whereby spectators were made “confident that they had seen all they needed to see” (Smith 2015:325) about the apparatuses, props, and costumes being used due to their simplicity. Thus, what was striven for by magicians was the production of “empty boxes” in which secret mechanisms were both rendered absent and seen to be absent.

Such studies suggest the importance of attending to the pattern of discursive and other movements that constitute efforts to make matters known as well as the basis for the affective pull of what is (not) shown. By way of undertaking this exercise in the case of WikiLeaks—and thereby informing a more general understanding of how secrecy, revelation, and openness can be bound together in understanding militarism—I will offer an alternative box analogy. This one speaks to how the promise of what the logs and cables might offer was able to be reconstituted through prior claims made about what they revealed.

At one level, collaborating organizations widely presented the leaking of the logs and cables as efforts to open the lid on a hidden world. With such a container metaphor for the truth (as in Lakoff and Johnson 1980), revealing is a matter of trying to pry open what was previously locked away. As suggested in the third and fourth sections, though, in important respects the cables and logs on their own were also treated as varyingly insufficient—at least at times. This insufficiency demanded something further—additional skill, investigation, context, etc.—and this meant that finding out the truth was presented as more or less possible, more or less successfully accomplished, and so on.

Overall, then, the logs and cables were treated in multiple and seemingly tension-ridden ways vis-à-vis what their disclosure had made available. And yet, such varying treatment

10. For a wider analysis of the limitations of the size of the data, see Coddington (2014).

11. See also Leigh and Harding (2011:218).

was rarely a matter of commentary in news reports. The categories for orientating to the releases given in the previous sections stemmed from the movements undertaken within the terms associated with a container framing. The potential for shifting between opposing senses of “transparent” (manifest vs. see-through) or “raw” (graphic vs. crude) pertained to the varying evaluations made regarding what was revealed in opening the box of statecraft.

The “stories behind the stories” provided a set of occasions for making claims about what had been made available through the logs and cables. They did so by going beyond the stories written in 2010—stories by the same authors as well as others. Yet, the “stories behind the stories” did so with little questioning or critical appraisal of what the same individuals or organizations had said previously. In other words, while trading on a notion of a past that needed to be revisited in order to be gone beyond, they were selectively coupled to previous histories of that past. This enabled authors to forward claims without needing to address how they conflicted with prior claims.

This overall situation—one in which arguments about the latest dramatic disclosure were produced by going farther than the bounds of what had been written before, but with circumscribed attention to what had been written before—provided the circumstances in which the story of WikiLeaks could be revisited over time. These representations enabled reinterpretations of meaning. They also revived the notion that there were figurative boxes that had been pried open for what they made present and, importantly, could be pried opened farther at some later point in time. In the manner one disclosure provided the starting bases for a next one, the process of revealing could be characterized as self-enabled. Indeed, in some respects, the more one knows about what had been said in previous WikiLeaks analyses, the more entry points for re-revelations exist.

An analogy that speaks to the dynamics above is that of a series of nested Chinese boxes. What was disclosed in one account of the logs and cables at a given point in time provided the basis for unpacking past claims in ways that varied from suggesting the leaks really did and actually did not reveal what took place. What was disclosed at a given point also served as a resource for what could be reopened later because previous knowledge claims provided the working boundaries for subsequent reinterpretations.

## Discussion

The concealment of information is often central to militaristic activities. Given the consequences of the use of force as well as the maintenance of military might, the stakes associated with secret keeping are considerable. As developed elsewhere in this issue (as in the articles by Weiss [2019] and Gusterson [2019]), efforts to bring to light sequestered events and documents can be important in holding organizations to account.

This article has attended to a prior set of issues than those centered on the usefulness of leaked documents, namely, how leaks get positioned as making understanding available. More than just a debate about what should be on display, this analysis has entailed posing questions about what had been put on display. I have suggested how the standing of the documents was subject to much negotiation in practice, even sometimes within accounts that otherwise prominently contended that they provided a graphic, unspun, and insightful window into statecraft. In making sense of the logs and cables, commentators forwarded notions of what was missing from our understanding of the world, what was missing or lacking from the leaked material, and what was missing or lacking from the coverage of it.

In contrast to settling what the logs and cables really told us, this article has asked how appeals to varieties of expertise accompanied and accomplished the interpretations of the leaks. While thereby calling into question the relatively narrow matter of the potential of these specific leaked documents to speak the truth, the argument has opened the far more expansive concern of how expertise and authority are constituted as part of making claims about statecraft. This recognition of contingency therefore offers the prospect that expertise can be remade. This is important because claims about what the leaked material showed laid the foundations for arguments about what modern statecraft is like and thereby the prospects for change. Claims about what the leaked material could show likewise posited who could define those realities and possibilities.

Another related implication of the analysis is to draw attention to how the mystique surrounding knowledge of statecraft is perpetuated through leaking. The Latin root for the English word “secret,” *secretus*, means “to separate” or “set apart.” Those in positions of authority in the state and elsewhere often seek to set themselves apart from others through noting their access to information, and so effect a form of mystification (see the article by Lutz in this issue [2019]). As a supplement to such lessons, this argument has suggested how mystification can be reproduced by those striving to expose militarism.

Thus, when seeking to reckon with militarism, it is important not only to attend to the assumptions guiding its practices but the assumptions guiding scholarly, professional, and popular analyses of it. Stated in general terms, a pitfall is how what is revealed—often by virtue of having been revealed—can take on solidity. When gripped too tightly, though, the potential for learning and insight can turn into a stultifying fixation. The treatment of certain information as unassailable goes hand in hand with the refutation of other possibilities, the closing down of inquiry, the carpeting over of inconsistencies, and the formation of hegemonic thinking. In short, seeking to grab hold can result in a slipping away.

The fixations I am alluding to relate not only to what has been grasped but also to the compulsion to grasp. As noted above, and echoing themes from elsewhere (Daston and Galison 2007; Hadot 2008), attempts at revealing the truth of statecraft often



presuppose or advance distinctions between surface and depth (see, as well, Nelson [2009]). The need to open a closed box, to get beneath the surface, or to “bring out into the light” hidden workings of the state are infused with expectations, investments, and affects. We pull toward what has been, or is being, revealed. That pull can make us insensitive to the assumptions that drive our seeking. As a result, just as militarism comes with gross and subtle commitments that need to be scrutinized, so too do attempts to reveal its inner workings. In attending to the dynamics of how leaked material gets positioned, this article supports the case that contending with the colonizing aspects of militarism requires not only investigation of the premises of militaristic projects but also inquiry into the premises guiding our endeavors.

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