

WikiRevolution?

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'It might actually change something.'
Pfc. Bradley Manning, Instant Messaging

Chris Anderson: Wow, so your leak really substantially changed the world?
Julian Assange: Yep.
TEDTalks

The first serious infowar is now engaged. The field of battle is WikiLeaks.
John Perry Barlow, Twitter

My consistent answer to the ponderous question of how WikiLeaks transformed our world has been: really, not all that much. It was a hell of a story and a wild collaboration, but it did not herald, as the documentarians yearn to believe, some new digital age of transparency.
'WikiLeaks, a Postscript', Bill Keller, New York Times

Has WikiLeaks changed the world?¹ The tweets, blogs and instant messaging of the digerati say yes, and much for the better. The official press releases of the new precariat – the U.S. Departments of Defense ('WikiLeaks...puts at risk the lives of our troops') and Justice ('...puts the safety of Americans at risk') – also say yes, but much for the worse. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton upped the ante and universalized the threat, declaring WikiLeaks 'an attack on the world'. The seen-it-all-before printerati said hold on a nano-second, this is nothing new. Nevertheless, they did their best to keep the story alive as long as their superannuated technology could be sustained by it.

The battle lines of WikiLeaks zigged and zagged at net-speed across a multitude of platforms. The rising hot air of righteous whistle blowing and the downdraft of official recriminations formed a perfect media supercell. WikiLeaks might or might not have changed the world, but it certainly resurrected the Marshall McLuhan 'brand': the medium *still* is the message.

WikiLeaks also re-opened the post-9/11 hunting season *on* the messengers. Julian Assange, self-proclaimed editor-in-chief of WikiLeaks, was given an ankle bracelet and confined to a Norfolk estate, pending the outcome

of a UK Supreme Court decision on an extradition request by the Swedish authorities to answer questions on outstanding sexual misconduct allegations. On the legal horizon, Assange faced possible extradition to the United States, where he is under investigation by a grand jury sitting in Northern Virginia, a venue known for reaching outcomes preferred by national security denizens.²

Meanwhile, Private Bradley Manning, the Army intelligence analyst based outside Baghdad who allegedly downloaded documents from the Secret Internet Protocol Router Network (SIPRNet), smuggled them out by re-writing a Lady Gaga CD, and began passing them on to WikiLeaks in late 2009, was arrested on May 26, 2010. He was charged under the Uniform Code of Military Justice for 'transferring classified data onto his personal computer and adding unauthorized software to a classified computer system in connection with the leaking of a video of a helicopter attack in Iraq in 2007' – which became known as the 'Collateral Murder' video – and 'communicating, transmitting and delivering national defense information to an unauthorized source and disclosing classified information concerning the national defense with reason to believe that the information could

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cause injury to the United States. As the investigation continued, 22 additional charges were laid, including leaking over a half million documents and two videos as well as posting wrongfully obtained classified material on the Internet with the knowledge that it would aid the enemy, a serious crime that comes with a death penalty (the prosecutors have said that they will only seek life imprisonment).³ Manning spent the next nine months in solitary confinement at the Quantico Marine Corps Base in Virginia, before being moved to a military correctional facility at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where he awaits a general-court martial.

Early accounts of WikiLeaks were highly polarized, with a tendency toward the sensational and personal. Was Manning an Army malcontent, a victim of gender identity disorder, an idealistic whistleblower – or perhaps all three? Was Assange a journalist with integrity or a cyber-pastiche of James Bond? Suggestions of psychological and sexual deviance, mixed with stories of bad hygiene and mixed-color socks, produced an unsympathetic portrait of a narcissist seeking some kind of political validation. But even the parodies of Assange that began to proliferate on late-night TV and on the web suggested a begrudging respect for his willingness to stand up and be...parodied?⁴

Info-deterrence against whistleblowers went into hyper-drive. Anyone associated with WikiLeaks, remotely or directly, now or in the future, was well advised to run for the hills of northern Cyberistan. Former Vice Presidential candidate Sarah Palin got considerable press when she declared those responsible ‘should be hunted down like al-Qaeda’. The McCain’s engaged in a family competition to take Assange down *and* out. Senator John McCain declared Assange a national security threat and called for his prosecution under the Espionage Act of 1917, which makes treasonable any effort to subvert the operations or promote insubordination of the U.S. military during wartime.⁵ Meanwhile, McCain’s daughter, Meghan, a *Daily Beast* columnist, labeled Assange ‘un-American’, echoing the language and logic of the follow-up to the Espionage Act, Seditious Act of 1918 (repealed in 1921), which prohibited ‘any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United States ... or the flag of the United States, or the uniform of the Army or Navy.’⁶ When informed Assange was not an American, Meghan McCain called him a ‘creepy rogue Swedish guy’ (for the record, Assange is Australian). Robert McCain, founder of ‘The Other McCain’ (no relation) blog, then coined the tag that went viral in conservative circles: ‘As for Julian Assange: Predator drone. Hellfire Missile.’

As attempts at explanation became tarred as exoneration, one of the lingering effects of 9/11, little room was left for the kind of detached analysis or historical comparison that might produce a credible answer to a much more important question: Has WikiLeaks changed the world? Or at the very least, influenced the practices of war and diplomacy?

Revolution – or a disturbance in the Matrix?

Obviously, the ‘world’ took notice and took action when WikiLeaks began to release confidential, classified and secret documents and videos, first in a trickle and then in a cascade. So yes, the world has been changed by WikiLeaks, *to the extent the world has become a simulacral effect of the Internet*. One does not have to accept Neo as ‘The One’ to believe this qualified assertion. One needs only to witness the (over)reactions of the military, diplomatic and political elites of the world, in which the particular interests of the United States are generalized as the worlds through a position of preponderance in global media. This is the new game, not of nations but of networks, in which a chronopolitical *balance of cyber-power* is rapidly displacing older geopolitical institutions of international relations.

Grand claims require granular evidence. To be sure, the first WikiLeaks, although numerous and regular, were hardly world-changers. They included the November 2007 post of the U.S. Army’s S(tandard) O(perating) P(rocdures) at Camp Delta, the Guantanamo Bay detention camp; the March 2008 posts of 35 videos censored by the Chinese of civil unrest in Tibet and the secret protocols of the Church of Scientology; the September 2008 post of Sarah Palin’s private Yahoo email account (yes, she had good cause to go after Assange); the November 2008 posts of extrajudicial killings by Kenyan police of human rights activists and the secret membership list of the extreme-right British National Party; and the March 2009 posts of documents revealing Barclay Bank’s tax avoidance schemes and the alleged effort by the Australian and Danish governments to ban websites that resulted in the censoring of websites unrelated to their original targets of terrorism and child pornography; the July 2009 post of a nuclear accident happening at the Iranian Natanz nuclear facility (which corresponded to later media reports of the Stuxnet cyber-attack on the facility’s centrifuges); and the November 2009 post of 570,000 intercepted pager messages on the day of the 9/11 attack.⁷

This is when WikiLeaks went down the rabbit hole. In October 2009 it posted the British Ministry of Defense’s secret Joint Service Protocol 440, on how to prevent information leaks by hackers, journalists and spies.

In March 2010 it followed up with a post on the U.S. Department of Defense Counterintelligence Analysis Report on the methods – and how to avoid them – of whistleblowers like WikiLeaks. The dragon had been poked.

Then came the ‘Collateral Murder’ video. Released on 5 April 2010, it showed a series of Baghdad assaults in July 2007 from the perspective of a U.S. helicopter gun camera. The classified footage showed in graphic detail the killing of at least twelve people, including two correspondents from Reuters. Two versions were released, one an unedited 39 –minute version, the other an edited an 18-minute version which had been edited and annotated. The latter did not clearly show that some of the victims had been carrying weapons. It didn’t matter: in the week that followed ‘Wikileaks’ became the most searched term on Google.

After that came ‘CableGate’, in which a small percentage (roughly ten percent) of 251,287 U.S. embassy cables passed to WikiLeaks were redacted and published by the *El Pais*, *Le Monde*, *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *Der Spiegel*. The material was billed as explosive. U.S. diplomats were spying on their counterparts (shock!). Arab states supported a first strike on Iran (horror!). The Chinese government was engaged in computer hacking (no!).

In response the U.S. Library of Congress and Department of Education blocked access to WikiLeaks on their computers and the Departments of State and Commerce forbade government employees from visiting WikiLeaks website. As the cyber-game escalated, Assange gave a wink and a nod to the possibility of the release of more government cables – hold onto your aluminum-foil hats – on UFOs. By year’s end, ‘Wikileaks’ climbed back up to the most searched term on Google.

Revolution – or history by other means?

But in the hall of mirrors that makes up the simulacra of global politics, another possibility emerges. From the first document posted by WikiLeaks in December 2006, on an alleged plot by Somali Islamic militants to assassinate Somalia government officials, to the December 2011 ‘Spy Files’ listing 160 intelligence contractors purportedly involved in mass surveillance, the glare of media attention created what could be called a *penumbra effect*, in which the original secret was overshadowed by the spectacle of the leak, effectively neutralizing the political impact of the revelation.

In such media-leptic moments, it is easy to join the chorus condemning the illegality of the leak while linking the act to the low moral character of Assange, who has done his best not to disappoint the keepers of state

secrets as well as public virtue. What gets lost in the white noise is a key question: has a leak *ever* changed the world? Some press accounts did cite the Pentagon Papers, leaked by Daniel Ellsberg (who has become a fierce defender of Assange). But the differences, in character (a secret study of the Vietnam War that contradicted the official views of the Pentagon, quantity, and medium, exceed the similarities.

One needs to go deeper and further back to find a comparable moment, one with a much more interesting outcome, when a revolution produced a historic leak that in turn changed history: November 8, 1917, the day after the Bolsheviks seized power and issued the ‘Decree on Peace’.

The Decree called for an armistice and for all parties ‘to start immediate negotiations for a just, democratic peace’ to end the First World War. The goals were radical: ‘by such a peace the government means an immediate peace without annexations (i.e., without the seizure of foreign lands, without the forcible incorporation of foreign nations) and without indemnities’. But it was the means to achieve them that took on a revolutionary character: ‘the government abolishes secret diplomacy, and, for its part, announces its firm intention to conduct all negotiations quite openly in full view of the whole people.’ As a first step, the government would ‘proceed immediately with the full publication of the secret treaties.’ All means of communication would be deployed:

Proposing to the governments and peoples of all countries immediately to begin open negotiations for peace, the government, for its part, expresses its readiness to conduct these negotiations in writing, by telegraph, and by negotiations between representatives of the various countries, or at a conference of such representatives.⁸

There was a coda, usually excluded from the official version, which comes from a final ironic remark made by Lenin during his presentation of the Decree to the Second All-Russia Congress of Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies: ‘We must remember that we are not living in the depths of Africa, but in Europe, where news can spread quickly.’⁹

A few days later Leon Trotsky took up the position of the first People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs, declaring he would ‘issue a few revolutionary proclamations to the peoples of the world and then shut up shop.’ Making good on the Decree, his first act was to open the safes of the Ministry and to publish the secret arrangements made between the Tsarist regime and the British, French and other allied governments for the annexation

of lands and sharing the spoils of the First World War. Among them was the 1915 Treaty of London between Italy and Triple Entente (England, France and Russia) for Italy's departure from the Triple Alliance (Germany and Austria-Hungary) in exchange for territorial annexations after the war, including the Austrian littoral and parts of the German Asian and African colonial territories. Trotsky released copies of Russia's negotiations with the British, French, and Italians that lead to the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, which effectively parceled out the remnants of the Ottoman Empire into spheres of influence for the signatory powers. Addressing the All-Russian Congress of Soviets on November 22, 1917, Trotsky justified the release of secret documents as not only in the interest of Russia but of the world:

In publishing the secret diplomatic documents from the foreign policy archives of Tsarism and of the bourgeois coalition Governments of the first seven months of the revolution, we are carrying out the undertaking which we made when our party was in opposition. Secret diplomacy is a necessary tool for a propertied minority which is compelled to deceive the majority in order to subject it to its interests...The Russian people, and the peoples of Europe and the whole world, should learn the documentary truth about the plans forged in secret by the financiers and industrialists together with their parliamentary and diplomatic agents. The peoples of Europe have paid for the right to this truth with countless sacrifices and universal economic desolation. The abolition of secret diplomacy is the primary condition for an honest, popular, truly democratic foreign policy.¹⁰

There was little immediate public reaction when the diplomatic correspondence and telegrams from the secret agreements were released and appeared in *Izvestiya* on November 23, 1917. But with their translation and publication in the *Manchester Guardian* in Britain on December 12, 1917, suppressed revolutionary parties in Germany, Britain and throughout Europe seized on the diplomatic chicanery to reinvigorate the antiwar movement. The world began to take note.

More leaks followed. Rarely noted in historical accounts is the making public of diplomatic and other foreign communications intercepted and deciphered by the infamous 'Black Cabinet' of the *Okhrana*, the espionage and security wing of the Tsarist Regime. Among the documents released and published by the French Communist newspaper *L'Humanité* were disclosures that the

Tsarist regime had been subsidizing French journalists and politicians.¹¹ Reformist parties in Western governments used the opportunity to challenge the aristocratic monopolization of diplomacy, which had abetted the rise of militarism in the lead-up and prosecution of the war. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, who in a joint address to the US Congress on January 18, 1918, presented his 'Fourteen Points', beginning with a page taken from the Bolshevik playbook, most prominently took up the reformist cause:

Open covenants of peace, openly arrived at, after which there shall be no private international understandings of any kind but diplomacy shall proceed always frankly and in the public view.¹²

Noble consanguinity, thinned on the battlefields and tainted by archival revelations, faced new popular challenges in the capitols of the defeated as well as victors. 'Old Diplomacy', associated with the secret addenda, complex machinations, and balkanized politics that cascaded into the First World War, was no match for the principles of transparency, self-determination, and democracy espoused by the so-called 'New Diplomacy'.¹³

Or so it seemed. As Richard Holbrook points out in his foreword to Margaret MacMillan's definitive work, *Paris 1919*, the 'headline version of history' paints a linear path from the failure of diplomacy to implement a just peace at Versailles to the German invasion of Poland barely twenty years later.¹⁴ Indeed, many contemporary crises can be traced back to the decisions made in the Hall of Mirrors, including the Balkan wars of the 1990s, two wars in Iraq, unresolved conflicts in the Caucasus, and the ongoing dispute between Arabs and Jews in the Middle East.

Revolution – or society of the spectacle?

As history phase-shifts with the information revolution, it is either too early or too late to say whether WikiLeaks has changed the world. Where once the truth was fixed by the nation-state, it now dances under global media spotlight. Long before the Internet was invented by Al Gore, Guy Debord, one of the most perceptive critics of what he called the 'society of the spectacle', identified the neutralizing effect of the media's ubiquitous gaze:

'The society signs a sort of peace treaty with its most outspoken enemies by giving them a spot in its spectacle.'¹⁵

This massaging of the medium hit home on a recent flight to Sydney, Australia. My seat companion was Jef-

frey Bleich, the Obama-appointed to be the US Ambassador to Australia. In the course of the 16-hour flight, we clashed on a single issue: WikiLeaks. With Assange still a popular figure in Australia – and rumored to be considering a run for public office (which just happened to come with criminal immunities) – Bleich had been spending an inordinate amount of time doing WikiLeaks damage control.¹⁶ Somewhere over the imaginary land mass where *Lost's* Oceanic Airlines Flight 815 disappeared, we agreed to disagree on the topic, in that diplomatic fashion that keeps troops in the barracks, missiles in their silos, and perpetual peace a viable aspiration rather than a tombstone inscription.

As it turned out, the medium that massaged our differences into a mutual respect was humor. Upon landing, he was met by two very fit Australians in suits that barely hid shoulder-holster bulges (or maybe just securitized Blackberries). As I went through the slowly snaking line for potential terrorists, illegal immigrants, and bearers of biological contaminants while he was whisked through the super-fast lane reserved for diplomats and what looked to be rugby players, I bid what I thought was a final farewell to the Ambassador. But I was surprised to find him waiting with the rest of us at the luggage carousel (I found Australia to be flatter than most countries in its regard of power). He introduced me to his security handler by informing him that this was the Julian Assange fan. He then leaned in conspiratorially and said not to worry: I had cleared the Interpol check he had ordered upon landing. A joke, of course.

The revolution will be decrypted

The last word comes not from high diplomacy or low punditry. Before history can render a verdict on WikiLeaks, technology, fittingly, might. In the interzone of physics, mathematics, and cryptography comes word of a breakthrough, not yet imminent but fully plausible, that quantum computing in the next 30, perhaps even 20 years, will render all encrypted secrets transparent. The revolution will not just be televised. It will be googled, facebooked, adbusted, tweeted, and instagrammed. There will be no secrets to be leaked, no dikes to plug, and the penultimate entry on WikiLeaks most likely will be cross-referenced to a single WikiQuote:

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.¹⁷

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Notes

1. The Wiki-spectre haunts this article. Aside from knowledge already housed in my organic database, the article relies mainly on web sources, many of them primary texts, interviews, and speeches that would be difficult for others to find, read, and fact-check. Wikis although relatively new have already become an indispensable part of the mediascape. The term itself has roots in the Hawaiian word for 'quick'; the concept goes back at least to Vannevar Bush's notion of a 'memex', a knowledge system with automatic links that he first proposed in a 1945 *Atlantic Monthly* article. The first wiki, in the sense of a collaborative computer database, was created by Ward Cunningham, who in 1994 produced the website and software, the 'WikiWikiWeb', that made it possible for multiple parties to create, edit and archive web-pages through a browser. Building on this technology, Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger created in January 2001 the first wiki encyclopedia, or Wikipedia. As of January 2012, it contains over 20 million articles in 283 languages. These figures come, of course, from Wikipedia, raising the issue of reliability, verifiability, and bias. With an editorial process based on consensus rather than credentials, it falls upon contributors to maintain editorial standards. There have been attempts to assess its accuracy, including a famous 2005 investigation in *Nature* that concluded its scientific articles to be no worse in accuracy than the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. (nor better, since 'serious errors' were found in both). A definitive study on accuracy and impact awaits (one that counts not just citations but surveys actual readers). One must obviously be vigilant and skeptical about what is found on the Internet – or, for that matter, in the press, on cable news, or even in the academic journal. But before reflexively rejecting the knowledge capital of Wikipedia or the value of other web-based informational outlets like blogs, consider this: the average refereed social science journal has 5-10 reviewers, including the editors; the average number of readers, depending on the discipline and who's counting, is between 17 and 900. Wikipedia has over 100,000 contributors/editors and 365 million readers. It – they, we – must be doing something right.

2. It might seem contradictory if not hubristic to claim to be 'editor-in-chief' of a format that prizes itself for its flatness: however, in spite of the 'wiki' preface and its web-base, WikiLeaks stopped being user-editable and became a limited-access, i.e., conventional, publishing site in May 2010. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WikiLeaks>
3. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bradley_Manning
4. None holds a candle to 'Robert Foster's Rap News 6: WikiLeaks' Cablegate: the truth is out there', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hl4NIA97GeQ&feature=relmfu>
5. It bears noting that McCain's demand that Assange be charged came shortly before he called for the release of Jonathan Pollard, the American spy sentenced to life imprisonment for passing top-secret documents to Israel.
6. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Espionage_Act_of_1917
7. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Information_published_by_WikiLeaks
8. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/25-26/26b.htm>
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11. See Mario Toscano, *The History of Treaties and International Politics* (Baltimore, 1966), p. 113.
12. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourteen_Points. There is credible evidence that President Wilson's 'Fourteen Points', including an end to secret diplomacy, no reparations, self-determination of nations, and a United States of Europe, were influenced by Trotsky's 'War and the International', a pamphlet he wrote in 1914. Wilson read the proofs for an English version in early 1918 – shortly before his administration banned postal rights for the International Socialist Review, which was about to publish the Preface to 'War and the International'. See <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1914/war/index.htm>.
13. See James Der Derian, 'Diplomacy', in *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World*, ed. Joel Krieger (Oxford, 1993), pp. 244-6.
14. Richard Holbrooke, 'Foreword', in Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919: six months that changed the world* (New York, 2001), pp. vii-xii.
15. Guy Debord, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur*
16. <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2011/s3135832.htm>
17. http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Walter_Benjamin