

**Habermas, the Public Sphere, and WikiLeaks:
The Public Sphere and the Right to Know**

By Mary Murray

CM490: Senior Seminar II

Doctor Lisa Holderman and Professor Alan Powell

Arcadia University, Department of Media and Communication

24 April 2020

The Habermasian Theory of the Public Sphere

German theorist Jürgen Habermas draws the beginnings of the public sphere back to various historical phases, focusing in on the conditions of a bourgeois society which promotes the public sphere¹. Habermas stresses the possible implications of the public sphere on the fields of mass media, as well as of jurisprudence, political science, and sociology¹. The idea of the public sphere is defined as a “public realm of social life” where citizens can debate and critique politics and state decisions, as well as social problems². The democratic idea of the public sphere permits citizens to interact, study and debate on public issues without fearing backlash from political and economically powerful groups³. The ideal speech community within the public sphere is able to communicate effectively and well, and the speech community is in a cultural context where political decisions can be discussed⁴. These politics are not discussed by experts, but are discussed based on the collective consensus reached from the mutual concerns of the citizens⁴. Habermas pointed out a specific domain in the social realm of life where the public sphere can be formed; he identifies private conversations as part of what helps constitute the idea of the public⁵. This idea of the private sphere includes the home, the family, and activities around these two circles; the idea of the public sphere includes the ancient city state and political

¹ Habermas, Jürgen. “The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society.” *Hermann Luchterhand Verlag: Darmstadt and Neuwied, Federal Republic of Germany*. 1962 (Translated in 1989 by Massachusetts Institute of Technology).

² Petersen, Jennifer. “Public.” p. 153-155.

³ Beers, David. “The Public Sphere and Online, Independent Journalism.” *Canadian Journal of Education*, 29, p. 109-130.

⁴ Wuthnow et al. “Cultural Analysis: The Work of Peter L. Berger, Mary Douglas, Michael Foucault and Jürgen Habermas.” Routledge & Kegan Paul; 1984.

⁵ Habermas, Jürgen. “The Public Sphere.” *Media Studies: A Reader*. p. 45-51.

activities concerning public welfare in that state⁶. Habermas states citizens act as a public when they deal with issues within the public interest without coercion from an outside force or group⁵. He also states that public discussions about the practice of a state and the coercive powers vested in a state provide a dichotomy to the political public sphere⁵.

Building on the Habermasian idea of the public and the public sphere, Petersen defines the public as a place where people can engage in debates past their immediate (or private) circles and can be a part of a broader, “more diffuse social formation” held together simply by conversations and not by ties². She identifies the root of the public sphere as when all citizens were engaged in debates and decisions which involved all of them, not private matters which belonged to individuals or smaller, niche groups; this became a “manifestation of citizen sovereignty”². Bloch identifies the importance of the private sphere in the formation of the public sphere, even going as far to say that the concept of public depends on the concept of private, and that without the private sphere, the public sphere would not exist⁷. He identifies the idea that an intimate, private sphere, through eighteenth century interpersonal concepts, gave collective clarification for concepts that were achieved through the public sphere⁷. Citizens present in the public sphere bring their private identities into the public sphere, which allows them to translate their personal beliefs and experiences into the general public opinion⁷. Habermas recognizes that functions can be exercised by the public both casually and informally (e.g. criticism and control of state sovereignty), as well as formally through election of state officials⁵. The first formation of the public sphere occurred in the time of early capitalism as a sphere between state and

⁶ Hohendahl, Peter and Patricia Russian. “Jürgen Habermas: The Public Sphere.” *New German Critique*, 3, p. 45-48.

⁷ Bloch, Ruth H. “Inside and Outside the Public Sphere.” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 62 (1), p. 99-106.

society⁶. However, public opinion can only be formed if the public takes part in a rational discussion⁶.

The issue concerning citizens' right to know came up in the eighteenth century²; this new idea gave a pathway for the media to serve as a platform to foster the public sphere through allowing citizens to discern, learn, debate, and judge in order to form actions³. The presence of the public sphere within the political realm claimed convergence of public opinion with the use of reason⁸. There are three ways Mansbridge points out to identify how opinion in the general interest emerges: critical rational debate, the public being open, and the debate taking place in the public; legitimacy of the public opinion comes from the collective agreement among the public⁸.

The idea of *opinion publique* (public opinion) involves an opinion purified through discussion within the public sphere to create a true opinion⁹. Bernstein identifies the need for conflicting opinions in order to create a plurality of individual perspectives to foster a healthy political lifestyle⁹. While the public sphere may be seen as an attempt at equalizing power between the state and the public, Mansbridge recognizes that equality of power is not realistic, and there will never be an absence of power⁸. He states democratic legitimacy depends on the degree of this equal power with participants and whether the fight between the participants and the power is procedurally fair⁸. Inside this public sphere, people debate over commonalities as a people, which creates the public opinion which can make the state accountable to their constituency⁷. To do this, individuals reflect on and influence exercises of state power⁷. This

⁸ Mansbridge, Jane. "Conflict and Commonality in Habermas's Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere." *Political Theory*, 40 (6), p. 789-801.

⁹ Bernstein, Richard J. "The Normative Core of the Public Sphere." *Political Theory*, 40 (6), p. 767-778.

process of communication leads to democratization; the shifting of balance from the power past equalization and into the hands of the public, Bloch believes, will result in revolution⁷. He identifies two separate subparts to the public sphere. The literary public sphere involves the court and family, while the political public sphere involves the egalitarian transformation of the state⁷. Habermas identifies structural changes and transformations as the threat to break apart the public sphere⁵.

From Then to Now: Historical Shifts in the Public

The theory of the public sphere identified by Habermas was centered around the idea of feudalism. The figure at the height of the feudal system (e.g. prince, king, etc.) represented the public, and displayed himself publicly while representing himself as a higher power⁵. Representative publicness shifted to the sphere of public power as a result of the formation of territories, nations, and states⁵. The meaning of public then shifted from the representation of an individual vested with authority to private people under the control of the state⁵. The idea of the bourgeois public sphere then emerged, where equality for members of society is generally assumed, even if they cannot be realized¹⁰. This *sui generis*, or sphere between an absolute state and a bourgeois society, distinguished the public sphere from state and private spheres¹⁰. The rise of private property, literary influences, coffee houses and saloons as places of public gathering, as well as the independent, market-based press helped create an area for public debate to take place; however, women and those who did not own property were not involved³. This sphere of private individuals together formed the public sphere⁵. Habermas identified the principle that

¹⁰ Hohendahl, Peter Uwe. "Critical Theory, Public Sphere and Culture: Jürgen Habermas and His Critics." *The Institution of Criticism*; Cornell University Press, 1982.

private people do not rule, as that would be against the principle of established authority and would be in conflict with claims to public power⁵. The rise of a bourgeois constitutional state brought the press the opportunity to engage in public use of reason and take advantage of commercial activity; the spread of press and propaganda expanded past the bourgeoisie, and conflicts that were kept in the private sphere were now able to enter the public sphere⁵.

The idea of the liberal public sphere, broken down by Habermas, is a sphere of private autonomy which is opposite public power. The liberal public sphere has two spheres, each with distinct functions pointed out by Habermas; the first sphere involves private individuals who come together to form a public, while the second sphere involves individuals who mediate the state with the needs of the bourgeois society to change authority from being political to being rational through the use of the public sphere⁵. Through the second half of the eighteenth century, newspapers became the place for public opinions and party politics⁵. Editing allowed a shift from news as selling information to news as dealing with the public opinion⁵. The press remained an institution of the public by disseminating and strengthening public discussions and conveying consumer culture; they were not just an organ for simply spreading information⁵.

The second public sphere Habermas broke down was the welfare-state public sphere. In this sphere, social organizations act on the state in the political public sphere, instead of the individual⁵. Habermas identifies what he calls the refueledization of the public sphere, where large organizations strive for minimum public approval to compromise with the state through staged publicity, and polarization occurs⁵. A shift of publicness occurred from subjecting people and things to the public reason and political discourse before public opinion. Today, it aids secret interest groups and renders support of the public and public prestige through publicity and not through true public opinion⁵. A weakening of the public sphere opposed by welfare and basic

rights makes publicness a requirement to all organizations who act in relation to the state⁵. Newer technologies do more than just contract and expand the public sphere². Beers recognized the web as a natural host for the public sphere³. The simple definition of publication favors the public sphere; publication, as Petersen defines it, is to make something public, is the presentation of something new, and is moving something that was once hidden into view². In the nineteenth century, mass commercial culture interfered with the idea of democracy promised by the public sphere⁷. Electronic mass media speaks directly to the consumer, passing through exposure to the public sphere¹⁰. Culture is a commodity and is consumed as entertainment¹⁰.

Critiques to the Public Sphere

Petersen's critique of the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere was based on the idea that publishing words without people to identify them with takes the personal weight of the voice out of the picture, excluding the voice from the public sphere². Cinema and broadcast which were speaking about minority groups like women, the working class, and uneducated members of society was seen as private interests leaking into the public sphere². Hohendahl saw the liberal public sphere as no longer politically possible, seeing as it had lost its significance as an instrument for political discourse⁶. He mentions the Marxist ideal of the public sphere; as the state merges completely with society, the public sphere would be seen as an autonomous public body which ensures a sphere of freedom, including freedom of time and of movement⁶. Hohendahl points out that including private interests within the public sphere would only be possible through the removal of capitalism⁶. Beers claimed that Habermas's idea of the public sphere would be lost to fragmented aspects of the public found on the Internet if it was seen as a

“broad public commons”³. Mansbridge observed that Habermas was in favor of conflict in opinions regarding general matters, but not in conflicts about self-interest⁸.

Bloch stated that there were holes in the idea of the public sphere, partly due to the sphere being both ideal and historical⁷. The public sphere had shifted from being a bourgeois idea to looking at historically oppressed groups⁷. Bloch quotes Mah as drawing the difference between niche examples given by Habermas (like Freemasons as people or as a group, and like coffee shops and taverns as places) versus the broad idea of forming an opinion⁷. He says that this idealizes the bourgeois intimate sphere and the public sphere⁷. According to Bloch, the public and private are not seen as opposite terms; private relates to the family and helped separate them from others, while both public and private served the same purpose⁷. Private is seen as being between public and the solitary and religious⁷. In his theory of the public sphere, Habermas does not address the changing relationship between private and public life throughout American history⁷. Americans didn't have individual rights to privacy as a dominant part of life until the twentieth century, and activism and discourse were more full of institutional voices which were not at all on the same page⁷. Changes in family life and in the architecture of the time helped the digression of the bourgeois public sphere⁹. Because of this, publicity loses its function and becomes staged; the public opinion becomes manipulated by special interests, and the press advertises and entertains instead of focusing on public debate⁹. Karl Marx saw the public opinion as a false consciousness that was a mask of the bourgeois class interests⁹. Building on Marx's ideals, Kant stated, “What has publicity become in our time? It has lost its critical function in favor of staged display; even arguments are transmuted into symbols to which again one cannot respond by arguing but only identifying with them.”⁹.

Arendt believed that the modern age idea of a social life overwhelmed the debate between public and private life and the debate of the public sphere⁹. It was a matter of revolution versus rebellion – the end of revolution was seen as the foundation for freedom⁹. Along with the idea of revolution comes the written constitution; both public writing and debate culminated in a Constitution⁹. Both business leaders and local community leaders know that a consensus is built by manipulating the public⁹. Dewey stated that the idea of the public is lost and that the public cannot survive without full publicity; restrictions and distortions about publicity distort the idea of the public opinion⁹. The revitalization of society and the public is at the center of political democracy⁹. In this, the public is seen as those who are indirectly and seriously affected either for good or evil⁹.

In Support of the Public Sphere

While there is much criticism of the public sphere, there is also a lot of support of Habermas's ideal. Hohendahl saw the literary public sphere as useful for sociological investigations of literature and criticisms⁶. Beers states that democracy works best when the media provides a free marketplace of ideas based on reason³. He also recognizes that critics celebrate the Internet as successfully fostering sources of independent media, as well as a basis for a new kind of public sphere he terms the mediasphere³. The Internet allows for democracy to become an interactive experience for the public³. The culture of citizenry modeled online allows for news to be actively received and challenged, as well as corrected, and pushed out into society through individual agencies³. The Internet allows for citizen journalism to take place, which allows for the shift of assumptions about authority and the influence that news media has to be lessened, maximizing the ability for information to be shared from multiple people to multiple

people³. Citizen journalism allows for democracy to thrive, as citizens must be willing to get involved in injustice and events which could likely cause injustice; citizens can do this by publishing investigative reports which shed light on government issues or injustices, which goes all the way back to the public right to know³. Habermas took Kant's idea that law must be directed at the general interest and must be universal, not biased toward the will of an individual or the will of many people⁸.

Bernstein says that the normative core of the public sphere is still relevant in today's society, despite enduring changes throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries⁹. Habermas saw publicity as the key to democracy since, in that political structure, opinions must go through channels of the public sphere⁹. Hohendahl sees the public sphere as revitalizing the dialectical relationship between the sociocultural and political systems¹⁰. Horkheimer and Adorno see culture as dressing art like political slogans, forcing these slogans on a resistant public and making them easily accessible to the public¹⁰. The public sphere is seen as analyzing historical change while critiquing the area of politics¹⁰.

Theoretical Conclusion and Introduction to Application and Critical Analysis

The presence of an independent media broadens the public sphere³. In a study conducted by Gardner, Csikszentmihalyi and Damon, 51% of journalists believe that changes occurring in the news media are negative, while 24% said these changes were mostly positive; the members of this 24% were mostly higher up in the management chain³. Journalism is seen as a business driven by the bottom line, which means that consolidation of the news media is a threat to the institution of the public sphere³. The media, according to Beers, has become a force able to manipulate the public and manufacture consent from the public, instead of shaping the direction

of the state³. The institution of democracy suffers and is weakened when citizens are limited in their choice of news media, as a larger choice presents more diverse voices and opinions for public exposure³. The more pessimistic American news editors fear for democracy, as citizens are no longer informed by news media agendas, but are indoctrinated; the public are unaware of alternatives, are fed misinformation, and are manipulated by media conglomerates and powerful sources who control what is shown in the news media and align it with their agenda³. Beers points out that independence can give way to the ability of powers to select what issues and points can be portrayed through the media³. Bloch observes that the public sphere by literary professionals and historians continues to serve as a go between separating states and their citizens⁷.

Alternative media are dictated by motives other than profit and offer a broader input than consolidated media outlets; these alternative sources of media provide insights to marginalized and minority views that would not be available in the large media conglomerates³. Citizen journalism and the presence of the public opinion can serve as a way to hold governments accountable for their wrongdoings and their missteps; this can be seen throughout the recent hysteria involving Edward Snowden and Julian Assange, specifically through Assange's website *WikiLeaks*. In modern day society, the growth of democratic ideals has taken a stronghold on citizens. The American democratic republic political system emphasizes the placement of checks and balances on the federal government, as well as reinforces the importance of individuals and the minority within the entirety of the governmental system. This goes hand in hand with the theory of the public sphere. Coined by Jürgen Habermas, the public sphere relies on the idea that private individuals come together to form a public, and the thoughts and beliefs of people in a

private setting, when brought in to a public setting, drives necessary conversations to make sure citizens have a voice and are not simply following what the government says.

Throughout the history of the United States and the general evolution of political systems over time, the public sphere has grown into a much more impactful and pivotal aspect of modern politics. The public sphere stemmed from the feudal system and the dominance of an elite; the citizens lacked representation or a voice in their political system, and the democratic system of government developed. This public sphere created a perfect platform for the media to act as the Fourth Estate in the American government, acting as a watchdog on the government and making sure the citizens' voices are heard. The media and the theory of the public sphere go hand in hand; there have been numerous instances, both on a global and national scale, which demonstrate the media's role in promoting or reinforcing the public sphere. In recent years, there have been multiple cases of leaking government wrongdoing, which allows the public a sense of transparency to see the misinformation or political framework behind what was officially reported and what was being hidden. Allowing government wrongdoing to be subject to the public sphere and the citizens who, in the American system of government, elect those in office, is paramount to democracy and trust between the people and the powerful.

Case Study #1: The Pentagon Papers

During the Nixon administration in the 1960s, the United States was heavily involved and present in the Vietnam War. A former military analyst, Daniel Ellsberg, attempted to create change about government decisions by going to lawmakers. When the lawmakers refused to hear him, he leaked top-secret information which exposed the lies from the Johnson administration about American involvement in Southeast Asia and Vietnam. Ellsberg attempted to initiate

legislative action and failed. Therefore, he turned to one of the most powerful mediums in the country to initiate change and to expose government deception to those who could help initiate that change: the media. After Ellsberg met with foreign editors from the New York Times and worked together to carefully construct the reports, the Times released the Pentagon Papers.

After the Attorney General saw the reports, the New York Times was sued for disclosing government secrets. A judge issued an injunction for the New York Times to stop publishing the information, but the media came together for the good of the people and put aside competition to promote and strengthen the public sphere, as well as to promote citizen sovereignty. The Washington Post had begun to report on the Pentagon Papers by citing the New York Times, and after the injunction, Ellsberg turned to the Post to pick up where the Times had left off. The Washington Post then became ensnared in a legal battle with the government along with the New York Times; this resulted in a decision in the Supreme Court which allowed the publishing of the material. Justice Black stated, “In revealing the workings of the government that led to the Vietnam War, the newspapers nobly did that which the Founders hoped and trusted they would do¹¹.

This was a landmark case and decision for press freedom regarding government coverage; the government could no longer restrain newspapers and censor their stories prior to publication. However, federal officials could still try and limit the speech used by the media. While Ellsberg did not succeed in bringing this issue to the attention of lawmakers through a traditional politically insulated process that the Founders implied in our government, he did use another process the Founders desired, and that was using the media as a Fourth Estate to foster this idea of a public

¹¹ Niraj Chokshi, “Behind the Race to Publish the Top-Secret Pentagon Papers,” *New York Times* (news), December 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/20/us/pentagon-papers-post.html>

sphere. In a democratic system, the people have the power. This means, when private ideas and beliefs become public by the use of some sort of forum (in this case newspapers), the people rise to be their strongest and are able to fulfill their duty of holding the government and its officials accountable for their actions. When American citizens are paying taxes and other stipends to the government, and when American soldiers are being sent to Southeast Asia to take part in this war, the people deserve to know what they are funding and supporting. The public sphere, in this case, allowed for citizens to manifest their sovereignty and exercise it over the government. This does not mean mutiny or an overthrow of the government like in archaic times, but rather a reiteration that the people hold the power to choose their leaders and, to an extent, form their government.

This case also involved private individuals coming together to form the public sphere. Without each individual from the New York Times who was involved in the publication of the Pentagon Papers, the story, voice, and narrative which was released to the American public would not have occurred. Those handful of people who shared the same belief – that what the American government was hiding and lying about in Vietnam was wrong – came together to spark the formation of the public sphere around that topic. In addition to Ellsberg, Neil Sheehan (who wrote the piece published in the New York Times), and Allan Siegal (who was a foreign editor for the New York Times), the public sphere was also empowered by other news media outlets who continued to disseminate the story of the Pentagon Papers and the implications the leaks had. When the Washington Post took on the burden of reporting about the Papers after the New York Times was barred from continuing their reporting, multiple other newspapers across the nation picked up on the story. The Washington Post put aside the fact that they were citing their rival, the New York Times, in the early coverage of the Papers, because they knew that this information had to be released and had to circle inside the public sphere.

While the leaking of the information formed a public sphere of its own, it also entered into a public sphere that was already present. Since the public already has been vested with a pivotal and powerful role by the Founders, democracy itself fosters a public sphere. While the Pentagon Papers can be connected to Watergate down the line, the differences between this case and more recent ones lie in the growth of digital and new media. Before the emergence of new media and the era of Internet 2.0, the government was able to exercise more censorship and be more aware of critical media coverage. The Pentagon Papers were copied using a photocopier, and were hand delivered to each recipient; they even had their own seat on a plane when a representative for the Washington Post got them from Ellsberg. The Pentagon Papers marks the beginning of a new era in both media and technology, as well as the beginning of an uphill battle in favor for the public sphere that has only gotten more nuanced and complex. The case of the Pentagon Papers, among others, poses the balancing test between protecting government secrets which are necessary for national security versus the right of the citizenry and the public to know what their government is doing. Especially in the American form of government, the people hold the power and the responsibility of electing government officials and holding them accountable for their blunders. The public sphere plays a pivotal role in the public's right to know and to hold their government accountable, as all of the information and opinions shared are through the public sphere.

Case Study #2: Edward Snowden and the National Security Agency

Edward Snowden, a former contractor for the National Security Agency (NSA), leaked information about secret surveillance programs in the United States to newspapers both in the United States and the United Kingdom. The Washington Post and the Guardian reported that the NSA is gathering phone records from Verizon from millions of American citizens; the day after,

both newspapers reported that the NSA is collecting information through multiple Internet providers in a program they call PRISM. The collection of leaks and disclosures from Snowden included a 'Black Budget,' which shows the successes and failures of the sixteen spy agencies that collectively make up American intelligence. The two intelligence sectors at the forefront of the leaks, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the National Security Agency (NSA) are allotted \$14.7 billion and \$10.8 billion in the budget, respectively¹². The PRISM data-collection program has access to servers of Microsoft, Google, Yahoo, Facebook, PalTalk, YouTube, Skype, AOL, and Apple, and the program gives the government access to emails, chats, videos, pictures, stored data, file transfers, video conferencing, and social media details, to list a few. Snowden shared multiple files and slides with the Washington Post and the Guardian, which all showed that the NSA was breaching American privacy laws.

The new surveillance programs headed by the NSA and the CIA were part of a series of national security and surveillance programs made by the Bush administration after 9/11, with the aim of foiling potential terrorist plots or plans before they could be put into motion. The program, however, was not disclosed to the Internet providers, and they had no knowledge of PRISM's existence. The surveillance program allows the government to have direct access to the servers of those Internet providers with both real-time information and stored information. PRISM allows for surveillance of Americans communicating with those outside the country, as well as within the United States¹³. As the NSA is an extension of the military, the military now has unprecedented

¹² Kennedy Elliott & Terri Rugar, "Six Months of Revelations on NSA," *The Washington Post* (news), June 5, 2013, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/national/nsa-timeline/m/>

¹³ Glenn Greenwald & Ewen MacAskill, "NSA Prism Program Taps in to User Data of Apple, Google and Others," *The Guardian* (news), June 7, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/06/us-tech-giants-nsa-data>

access to civilian and domestic communication. This creates a unique dichotomy between the public and the government, as the public sphere and the use of the public sphere as a sovereign voice for the citizens is encroached upon by the government.

The shift in the media and technology from the Pentagon Papers to the whistleblowing by Snowden (and Assange, which will be addressed later) plays a huge part in the dissemination of information, and ultimately broadens the scope of the public sphere from the classic Habermasian example of a tavern or pub to a fully global scale. The precedent set from the Pentagon Papers which gave media and journalism more freedom of speech when it came to speaking out on the government was leveled up in the Snowden case. Snowden not only shared information about American surveillance techniques with the American media, but also with the British media. The Guardian and the Washington Post are two of the most recognized and trusted sources for information in the news media world, and going to them with the information about the NSA set the stage for the monumental response that occurred. Snowden's revelations about how the American government changed their surveillance techniques after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 helped fuel the public sphere in discussing the Patriot Act and its renewal under the Obama Administration; it has also helped facilitate the conversation weighing between the public's right to know versus the choice to protect information for national security reasons. The public sphere has grown immensely following the Snowden leaks, especially when looking at the constitutionality of the NSA's actions, and it will continue to be the primary forum for citizens to debate and talk about their rights and their beliefs regarding government actions.

The NSA and other American intelligence agencies claim their programs are constitutional and are subject to oversight from the legislature and the judiciary; they believe that the secrecy of

the program is vital in detecting potential terrorist plots¹⁴. The agency has largely responded by saying that if people have nothing to hide, they should not be concerned, but the amount of information they are authorized to gather about a single target to build what they call a ‘pattern of life’ has been seen as concerning in the public sphere. The NSA has the ability to track communications that are three degrees of separation¹⁵ from a target; this can take your number of contacts from two digits to eight¹⁴. With the NSA forced to defend the PRISM program and their surveillance operations, the public sphere plays a vital role in holding them accountable. When the NSA tried to argue their program helped foil 54 potential terrorist plots, the media (which is a key part of the public sphere) fact-checked the number, which ultimately led the NSA deputy director to admit only one possible terrorist plot was disrupted by the surveillance program¹⁴.

Edward Snowden’s ultimate goal when sharing the surveillance plans and documents was to create a public discourse about the ethics of such a program, and he succeeded beyond measure¹². The transition of the information from in the private sphere of the government to in the public sphere has impacted how citizens think about their government and their communications as a whole. The media played a pivotal role in sharing and exposing the information; much like with Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers, Snowden knew the power and reach of the media and used their influence on and position in the public sphere to have the maximum reach possible. The public sphere was infringed upon through the surveillance programs, and Snowden rallied an even larger, global same public sphere by informing them of the PRISM program and the NSA’s actions

¹⁴ Ewen MacAskill & Gabriel Dance, “NSA Files: Decoded: What the Revelations Mean for You,” *The Guardian* (news), November 1, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/interactive/2013/nov/01/snowden-nsa-files-surveillance-revelations-decoded#section/1>

¹⁵ Three degrees of separation in the PRISM surveillance program refers to the fact that, after picking a target to execute surveillance on, data can be collected on up to three levels of contacts (e.g. a friend of a friend of a friend of the target’s data will be collected).

on both a national and a global scale. Exposing this information to the public and making it a topic within the public sphere caused citizens to retaliate, and has created a conversation which needed to take place.

Case Study #3: Julian Assange and WikiLeaks

In 2010, the now infamous whistleblowing organization WikiLeaks, led by Australian journalist Julian Assange, published secret government documents regarding American military activity in the Middle East, as well as diplomatic cables. American military information analyst Chelsea Manning contacted Assange to share American military reports detailing the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; one of the most shocking documents she shared was a video of the American military killing a dozen civilians who were unarmed, as well as two Reuters journalists¹⁶. When asked about her view on government transparency, Manning said, “there are plenty of things that should be kept secret... Let’s protect sensitive sources. Let’s protect troop movements. Let’s protect nuclear information. Let’s not hide missteps. Let’s not hide misguided policies. Let’s not hide history. Let’s not hide who we are and what we’re doing.”¹⁶. Later in the year, Assange and WikiLeaks shared classified diplomatic cables from American embassies, many of which detailed American views on highly sensitive international issues and situations, including Pakistani instability, international relations between China and North Korea, and the Russian mafia, to name a few¹⁷.

¹⁶ Amanda Holpuch, “Chelsea Manning: I leaked reports after seeing how Americans ignored wars,” *The Guardian* (news), June 12, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jun/12/chelsea-manning-interview-leaked-documents>

¹⁷ David Leigh, “US embassy cables leak sparks global diplomatic crisis,” *The Guardian* (news), November 28, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/nov/28/us-embassy-cable-leak-diplomacy-crisis>

Assange and WikiLeaks struck again in 2016 during the presidential election cycle, releasing emails from Hillary Clinton from the Democratic National Committee, damaging the democratic party and her presidential campaign¹⁸. Thousands of messages were hacked from the email account of the Clinton campaign chairman John Podesta, with content ranging from office politics and framing herself and her campaign¹⁹. The leaks included her Wall Street speeches and both a list of potential vice president picks and campaign slogans; this gave an unprecedented view into the management of a presidential campaign, but also gave the public access to classified information. The Clinton campaign blamed the Russian government for sourcing the information to WikiLeaks, citing their motive as helping Trump win the presidency. While many of the massive and more recent leaks have targeted America, WikiLeaks has not only targeted the United States; Assange and his organization have shared government documents about scores of governments and countries around the world.

Assange and his organization have taken transparency within the public sphere to a whole new level. As Manning stated previously, there is a distinction between leaking information to hold a government accountable for wrongdoing and releasing military tactical movements. The Pentagon Papers detailed the decisions surrounding the Vietnam War and American presence in Southeast Asia. Edward Snowden's whistleblowing on the NSA detailed American surveillance methods which had an international impact. Assange's whistleblowing through WikiLeaks has had a wide and broad-sweeping impact both on a national and global level. There are a few key

¹⁸ Liam Stack, Nick Cumming-Bruce & Madeleine Kruhly, "How Julian Assange and WikiLeaks Became Targets of the U.S. Government," *New York Times* (news), April 11, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/world/julian-assange-wikileaks.html>

¹⁹ David Smith, "WikiLeaks emails: what they revealed about the Clinton campaign's mechanics," *The Guardian* (news), November 6, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/06/wikileaks-emails-hillary-clinton-campaign-john-podesta>

differences between the Pentagon Papers and the cases of Snowden and Assange; the reach of the media and the globalization of digital media was not as strong with Ellsberg's whistleblowing as it was with Snowden and Assange. While Ellsberg was the one who stole and leaked information, the government went after the media outlets which leaked the Pentagon Papers. In the cases of Assange and Snowden, the government pursued them as individuals and did not pursue the media outlets who disseminated the stories. In the case of WikiLeaks, the public sphere gained the most reach globally than it had before in this new era of whistleblowing and leaking on the Internet and social media.

When Chelsea Manning worked with Assange to leak the information about American military involvement in the Middle East, she attempted to take her concerns and findings through the appropriate channels in the military. She was silenced by those above her and told to not worry about those things²⁰. Sharing the information with Assange and using WikiLeaks as the primary leaking outlet allowed for full global transparency when looking at military and political shifts in Iraq. WikiLeaks, in sharing the troop movements and videos of American soldiers shooting and killing innocent bystanders, has not only given the public a sense of sovereignty in holding the government accountable, but also has created a much larger and more powerful public sphere than Manning likely anticipated. The same can be said in analyzing the 2016 Presidential Election: the leaks from the Clinton campaign secretary's email gave the political public sphere in America the power to decide the values they wanted in the next administration. The diplomatic cables shared by WikiLeaks had a much more global reach and allowed individual national public spheres to transform into a singular, global public sphere.

²⁰ Chelsea Manning, "The Fog Machine of War," *New York Times* (news), June 14, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/15/opinion/sunday/chelsea-manning-the-us-militarys-campaign-against-media-freedom.html?_r=1

The leaked information from WikiLeaks allowed for private individuals and small groups to use both digital media and word of mouth to expand private beliefs into the public sphere, especially regarding press freedom and the public right to know versus protection of national security. The leaks also allow for private information from the government to enter the public sphere, which gives the citizenry a sovereignty of sorts over holding the government accountable or responsible for their wrongdoing. Assange's leaks have both strengthened the public sphere in a positive and negative way; the public sphere is able to, along with the media, act as a Fourth Estate, but it also divulges information unrelated to governmental wrongdoing which may become detrimental to a country or government's national security.

Conclusion

The public sphere is able to derive a sense of strength and responsibility when whistleblowers and leakers like Ellsberg, Assange and Snowden exploit government wrongdoing. The trick in the balancing act, however, is between giving the public sphere enough power and information to act as the Fourth Estate with the media and exercise a sense of citizen sovereignty, versus giving the citizens and the public sphere too much information and power to make decisions unrelated to the public right to know. This can often be seen, as illustrated in the previous case studies, in the debate between the public right to know and protection of national security. The process of information leaving the private sphere and entering the public sphere, especially in a media atmosphere (which, with the Internet and digital or social media) is so immediate and broad-reaching, allows the public and the citizenry to take up a position of power and of moral responsibility. The whistleblowing from Ellsberg, Assange, and Snowden, among other cases, is necessary to keep democratic governments functioning and allow the public to hold those in power

responsible and answer for their actions. The line may be drawn when the leaking or whistleblowing motivation shifts from holding a corrupt government accountable to sabotaging the democratic process or influencing desired outcomes in politics, media, or any facet of governmental function. The public and the media hold a critical role in facilitating a responsible, transparent government or administration which takes accountability for its actions, while also operating to protect national security within responsible measures.