

# After WikiLeaks: Lessons For Journalism (guest blog)

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Some reflections on our After Wikileaks panel discussion at the [POLIS Journalism Conference: Media & Power](#)

By Svenja Ziegert



WikiLeaks Crowd

The “After WikiLeaks” panel discussion at the Polis Journalism Conference was inspiring in many ways. Firstly, because it dealt with questions of journalistic challenges that have resulted from the information leaks. And secondly, because it became clear that the value of studying media at university is growing.

The panellists were mostly journalists turned academics – Angela Philips from Goldsmiths, George Brock from City University, John Naughton from the Observer/Cambridge University and Chair Charlie Beckett, now LSE but formerly a TV hack. Only Alison Powell from the LSE Media Department is a pure academic. They took a different approach on the much debated story of WikiLeaks: they were mostly concerned with how it has affected and challenged the ethics and role of journalism.

It seems like, yet again, journalists are facing an era of adaption. They will have to adapt to a new environment where, the panellists argued, decoding large chunks of data not only means power, but greater responsibility. In order to do this, journalists require a combination of mixed skills that are no longer limited to pure journalistic writing and research skills.

They need to tool up, be numerate, and begin to understand network theory in order to create a properly networked fourth estate.

In the new information environment, responsible journalism is also more important than ever. The coverage of the WikiLeaks phenomenon, was criticism by John Naughton for its obsessive focus on Assange and the sexual allegations against him. The danger, said Naughton, was that by attacking WikiLeaks the mainstream media might encourage a crackdown by the authorities that harms media freedom in general.

Angela Philips warned that WikiLeaks has shown how easy it is for journalists to get distracted from what is going on under their nose by the international drama of a big data story. As Angela Philipps rightly pointed out, instead of focusing on the drama of international leaks, journalists should concentrate more on investigating more local scandals and conspiracies. This, she concluded, is necessary to keep a check on democracy – the core duty for journalism as the fourth estate.

Where does this leave us? I think it means that journalists will increasingly need to have a certain degree of media theory literacy. This should be inspiration and encouragement to all of us studying media at university, who want to become journalists but may have been sneered at for studying communications. The WikiLeaks story has demonstrated that journalists will increasingly need to be able to identify how power structures work and how they are affected by information leaks in order to prevent being exploited.

Just think about the ambivalent symbiosis that was created by the cooperation of WikiLeaks and the mass media, as John Naughton pointed out. The panel felt that this kind of partnership between different information organisations may become more common in the future, but there are always potential conflicts.

As Alison Powell argued it is important to understand the increasing growth of networked power, in which the media is operating. But even more important, media theory teaches us what journalism was originally about: not (only) to

create and headlines that draw as much attention as possible – as we saw happening in the coverage about WikiLeaks – but to provide the public with information that supports the flourishing of democracy. And this, I found, was the most important lesson that came out from the discussion.

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Go here for [Video and links to blogs about the POLIS Journalism Conference](#)

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