Globally Networked Public Spheres? The Australian Media Reaction to WikiLeaks

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Abstract

The global release of 250,000 US Embassy diplomatic cables to selected media sites worldwide through the WikiLeaks website, was arguably the major global media event of 2010. As well as the implications of the content of the cables for international politics and diplomacy, the actions of WikiLeaks and its controversial editor-in-chief, the Australian Julian Assange, bring together a range of arguments about how the media, news and journalism are being transformed in the 21st century.

This paper will focus on the reactions of Australian online news media sites to the release of the diplomatic cables by WikiLeaks, including both the online sites of established news outlets such as *The Australian*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*, the ABC's *The Drum* site, and online-only sites such as *Crikey*, *New Matilda* and *On Line Opinion*.

The study focuses on opinion and commentary rather than straight news reportage, and analysis is framed around three issues: WikiLeaks and international diplomacy; implications of WikiLeaks for journalism; and WikiLeaks and democracy, including debates about the organisation and the ethics of its own practice. It also whether a "WikiLeaks Effect" has wider implications for how journalism is conducted in the future, particularly the method of 'redaction' of large amounts of computational data.

WikiLeaks and the public sphere theories

The theory of the public sphere is commonly seen as one of the major contributions of media and communications theory to the social sciences. First presented by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas 1989), the concept of the public sphere draws upon a historical and sociological account of the rise of liberal-capitalist institutions and the modern state from 17th and 18th century Europe to the present day. Habermas proposed that social institutions such as the mass media have played a critical role in enabling citizens to debate matters of public significance, and through such debates a rational-critical discourse can emerge through which public participation bears upon the conduct of the state, thereby better securing the relationship between the promises of liberal democracy, its potential empowerment of citizens, and the practice of public institutions.

Jostein Gripsrud (2009) has observed that Habermas's conception of the relationship of knowledge, communication and debate to notions of 'the good society', has clear echoes in philosophies of the Enlightenment, most notably Immanuel Kant's analysis of how knowledge can enable self-emancipation of human subjects, and John Stuart Mill's defence of freedom of expression as the best means of ensuring both the accountability of governments and the protection of individual rights and freedoms. As developed by Habermas, the public sphere is however, something of an historically self-limiting concept. The rise of mass media, large corporations, the corporatist state, the increasingly instrumentalist and privatised use of knowledge, and the rise of "information management" professions such as advertising and public relations, were all seen by Habermas as factors making "focus on individuals enlightening themselves and each other while controlling government through the public use of reason was more difficult to maintain … [as] mass organisations and mass media had thoroughly changed society and the conditions of public communication" (Gripsrud 2009: 7). Habermas referred to this as the "re-feudalisation of the public sphere", becoming a forum for the representation of power and pseudo-debates, as the real processes of decision-making became increasingly obscured from public view.

It is the critical realist element of public sphere theories that most clearly differentiate them from liberal media theories as developed in the "Four Theories of the Press" paradigm (Seibert 1956). Habermas observed that the evolution of media, from small-scale newspapers and magazines to large-scale industrial conglomerates owned by those with a diverse range of interests and significant power networks, meant that the freedom of the media from state control was not the only, or possibly

any longer, the primary concern in maintaining a democratic public sphere. As liberal societies are also capitalist societies, the dynamics of capitalism as they impact upon media – including concentration of ownership and control, class-based and other social inequalities, commodification, and the intertwining of economic and political power – were seen by Habermas as undermining the capacity of commercial media to realise the citizenship principles associated with "Fourth Estate" ideals. At the same time, public sphere media theories have often incorporated a 'tragic' account of the relationship of media to citizenship in liberal-capitalist societies (Garnham 1990; Dahlgren 1995), where the public sphere appears to be consistently imperiled by the rise of commercial media interests. Given the dialogic conception of public discourse that Habermas identifies as being central to the public sphere, it is not surprising that, as John Thompson has observed, Habermas was inclined to interpret the impact of newer communication media, like radio and television, in largely negative terms … because the communication situation they created [was one] in which the reception of media products had become a form of privatised appropriation" (1995: 258).

A number of writers have identified the possibilities created by the Internet and digital media technologies to develop a *virtual public sphere* (Poster 1997), or what Benkler (2006) termed the *networked public sphere*. Habermas was himself pessimistic about the potential for the Internet to revivify the public sphere, expressing concern about "the fragmentation of … mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics" (Habermas, 2006: 423). The potential for Internet communications to generate new forms of the public sphere and civic engagement has been widely debated, particularly when it is also acknowledged that the public sphere concept needs to be understood in the plural rather than the singular, and this has led to a questioning of Habermasian pessimism about new media (Dahlgren 2005; McNair 2006; Gripsrud 2009; Breese 2011).

If the Internet having the potential to enable a virtual public sphere constitutes the first relevant contextual factor, the intersection between media and globalisation, and the question of whether a *global public sphere* may be emerging, provides the second. Giddens (2002), Tomlinson (2007) and Castells (2009) have identified globalisation as a *cultural* phenomenon as much as an economic one, and give global media technologies a central role in scalar transformation. Ingrid Volkmer argued that developments in international communication technologies, combined with the rise of global news services, "have established a new transnational political news sphere, which deeply transforms conventional notions of the (national) public sphere within a new transnational space" (Volkmer 2003: 11). Brian McNair has argued that the public sphere is shifting from a national, to an increasingly global, phenomenon so that

> …the twenty-first century public sphere is much more complex and interconnected, and it is global,
> interacting with the local, and using ICTs to involve global publics in engaging the key issues of the time …
> Politics has become globalised, and so has the means of debating it (2006: 143).

In the field of international political economy, the rise in the number, size and significance of non-state actors in international relations has given rise to a literature on the nature of global civil society (Lipschutz 2005), and how the ways in which such entities use communications media can give rise to a global public sphere (Crack 2008).

The final element of debates about the public sphere that frames discussions here, concerns the question of the *plural and contested nature of public spheres*, and the question of publics and counter-publics. There have long been a series of critiques of Habermas' conception of a unified, critical-rational public sphere being a normative ideal for a future democratic society (Fraser 1992; Warner 2002; McKee 2006). Nancy Fraser argued the need to acknowledge that "multiple but unequal publics participate in public life" (Fraser 1992: 128), and the resulting need to speak of *publics* and *public spheres* rather than *the* public and *the* public sphere.

The concept of counter-publics was developed by Warner (2002) in relation to those in subordinate positions who organise collectively to contest dominant 'public' positions in the wider society, such as those surrounding race, gender and sexuality; McKee (2006) and Breese (2011) are among those who have used such a concept to understand the plurality of forms of media and how they critically engage with civil and political society. From a different perspective, Chantal Mouffe (1999) critiqued Habermas for his underlying assumption that principles of rationality and open debate can and should mitigate conflict in complex modern societies. Mouffe instead proposed that a more equal and democratic social order needs to instead be based upon *agonistic pluralism,* whereby

> …a well functioning democracy calls for a vibrant clash of democratic political positions', and 'the prime task
> of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public, in order to render a rational
> consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards democratic design (1999: 751).

WikiLeaks as a case study in the global and virtual public sphere

In many respects, the WikiLeaks site provides an ideal case study for considering questions about whether the 21st century public sphere is, or should be, more global, virtual and agonistic in its nature. Founded in 2006, and describing itself as "an uncensorable system for untraceable mass document leaking" (Moss 2010), WikiLeakshas carried confidential cables relating to: the treatment of detainees at the US Camp Delta military base at Guantanamo Bay; the 'bibles' of the Church of Scientology; membership of the far-right British National Party; the 2008 Peruvian oil scandal; a 2009 accident at the Natanz nuclear facility in Iran; toxic dumping on the Ivory Coast; corruption by former Kenyan leader Daniel arap Moi; correspondence among climate scientists related to global warming; and the alleged list of web sites to be blocked by authorities in Australia, Denmark and Thailand through mandatory Internet filtering (Wikipedia 2011). Notionally headed by the peripatetic Australian Julian Assange, but with over 1,200 registered volunteers worldwide, WikiLeaks has in many ways epitomised the spirit of the global and digital counter-publics that the Internet has brought forth, and for whom the term "global civil society" is too formal to truly capture their *modus operandi*. Brigid Delaney, writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, describes them in these terms:

> WikiLeaks has become the story of the new, globalised, hyper-mobile age – an age in which the importance

> of physical place has receded, and community work, expression and politics are increasingly taking place in cyberspace.
>
> The children of this globalised age, including Assange, are new nomads: nation-stateless, hyper-connected, international, using English as the lingua franca, travelling from place to place on cheap flights, staying on couches or in short-term sublets …
>
> Work in this globalised world is untethered by geography – all you need is a laptop and a Wi-Fi connection. Assange epitomizes something of the spirit of the age. He moved 37 times by the time he was 14, and seems to be at home in this wandering, homeless state – a true citizen of the world (2010).

WikiLeaks may have remained an interesting but marginal case study of interest to new media analysts and would-be Deleuzians, but for three major leaks that it undertook in 2010. In April 2010, it released classified video footage showing a 2007 U.S Air Force strike in Baghdad, Iraq, where the pilots killed 12 unarmed people, including two Reuters employees, whose cameras were mistaken for weapons. The video, titled "Collateral Murder", saw the term 'WikiLeaks' move from something of interest to hackers and security agencies to one of the most searched for terms on Google (Wikipedia, 2011). In July 2010, WikiLeaks released 92,000 documents related to the war in Afghanistan between 2004 and 2009, hosting them both on its own site and making them available on a selective basis to the *The Guardian* in the UK, *Der Spiegel* in Germany, and *The New York Times* in the US. This was followed, in October 2010, by the release of around 400,000 documents relating to the Iraq war, among which were claims that the US government had ignored reports of torture by the Iraqi authorities since the war began in 2003. Finally, and most famously, in November 2010 there was the release of over 250,000 diplomatic cables from 274 US embassies from around the world. These were made available to, and published online by, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *Der Spiegel*, *Le Monde* in France, and *El País* in Spain, and a range of other publications, including the Fairfax newspapers in Australia, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*.

In developing a distinctive research angle on the mountain of material and scholarship that has emerged, or is now emerging in relation to WikiLeaks, we have sought to analyse its claims to being part of a new global and virtual counter-public sphere in a counter-intuitive way. Acknowledging that while Assange may claim to be a global citizen, he is nonetheless certainly an Australian one – at least in terms of the passport that he holds – we have undertaken an analysis of how WikiLeaks was reported in the Australian media.

We have focused on the period in which the US diplomatic cables were released from 28 November 2010, and its aftermath, up to and including the period of his appeal against the decision by English courts to allow his extradition to Sweden on sexual assault charges on 25 February, 2011. We have focused on the print/online media rather than television and radio, and on opinion and commentary pieces more than on direct news coverage. The study looked at the online coverage of WikiLeaks in the three major newspapers – *The Australian*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* – as well as commentary on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's online sites, *The Drum* and *The Drum Opinion*. In order to get a sense of differences in analysis between mainstream media and online-only sites, we also looked at the commentary about WikiLeaks on the subscription-based site *Crikey*, and on the freely available online public affairs sites *New Matilda* and *On Line Opinion*. In order to best frame what is a large amount of material, we have focused analysis on three thematic areas:

- Claims that WikiLeaks ushers in a new era of *radical transparency* in the conduct of international relations, and that this can in turn address a longstanding anomaly in liberal interpretations of the public sphere, which contrast the domestic arena as one of legitimate democratic political contestation, but international relations being required to circumvent questions of political openness and transparency due to the primacy of "reason of state";

- The impact of WikiLeaks on journalism, not simply in terms of bringing new material into the public domain, but in terms of both the use of computational techniques to generate news material, and the challenge to mainstream journalism from what Benkler (2011) terms the networked public sphere;

- Whether publication of the diplomatic cables by WikiLeaks advances democracy, and whether it should be best understood as affirming core principles of liberal democracy, such as a free press and investigative journalism, or as a challenge to liberal democracy. In this light, the question of the ethics of the organisation itself become relevant.

Radical transparency and the public sphere: WikiLeaks and the conduct of international relations

The release of the US diplomatic cables can be seen as an action consistent with Assange's concept of *radical transparency* as the vital means of challenging political power in an age where information and ICTs are at the core of its operations. In his essay for *The Monthly* on Julian Assange, Robert Manne summarised the relationship between power and information in Assange's thinking in this way:

> Contemporary conspiracies rely on unrestricted information flow to adapt to and control their environments. Conspirators need to be able to speak freely to each other and to disarm resistance by spreading disinformation among the people they control, something they presently very successfully achieve. Conspirators who have control over information flow are infinitely more powerful than those who do not (2011: 52).

What Manne refers to as Assange's 'cypherpunk' ideology, borne out of a long involvement in hacker movements and the 'digital underground' (Dreyfus 1997), should not be read as a variant of mainstream liberalism, which is how much of the media commentary has read WikiLeaks, but as a more radical critique of the state that identifies computer technologies as being at the centre of the contemporary information war (Manne 2011).

In an information war, diplomatic cables are an interesting point of attack, as they go right to the heart of foreign policy. Much

of the debate about the release of the US diplomatic cables in November 2010, both in Australia and internationally, focused upon the extent to which citizens have a right to expect transparency on the part of their governments in the conduct of international relations, as compared to the argument that a degree of secrecy and confidentiality is a necessary condition for the effective conduct of international diplomacy. Democratic political theory frequently makes an exemption to the general proposition that greater public participation and open communication between governments and their citizens, which is at the core of the concept of the public sphere, in the case of foreign policy. The *realist* perspective on international politics argues that disagreements about policy goals, which are institutionalised in liberal democracies around parliamentary and other forms of political competition, must be subordinated to wider questions of "reason of state" in the international arena (Gilpin 2002). It also implies that states must have the capacity to act independently of their citizens when required in the interests of national security, whether this involves intelligence-gathering activities, confidential negotiations with other states, or even in some instances intervening directly in the affairs of other sovereign states.

Assange and his WikiLeaks colleagues rejected such a realist perspective, seeing it as both putting power before principles, and as potentially self-defeating, as its claims to an intellectual leadership on the part of the state is not grounded in the ideas, beliefs and moral authority of its citizenry. As a result, it is always vulnerable to charges of lacking legitimacy. Assange referred to exposing the inner machinations of government as a form of "secrecy tax" (quoted in Manne 2011), which is less about bringing sunlight to bear upon the political sphere – the classic liberal defence of a free press and the public sphere – than about the more radical principle of throwing sand in the gears of governments and corporations. As Assange himself put it:

> The more secretive or unjust an organization is, the more leaks induce fear and paranoia in its leadership and planning coterie. This must result in minimization of efficient internal communications mechanisms (an increase in cognitive "secrecy tax") and consequent system-wide cognitive decline resulting in decreased ability to hold onto power as the environment demands adaptation.

> Hence in a world where leaking is easy, secretive or unjust systems are nonlinearly hit relative to open, just systems. Since unjust systems, by their nature induce opponents, and in many places barely have the upper hand, mass leaking leaves them exquisitely vulnerable to those who seek to replace them with more open forms of governance(2006).

While arguments of this nature have a long lineage, two factors in the 2000s have made many particularly receptive to the WikiLeaks concept of leaking as a form of counter-power. The first is the protracted nature of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the many and varied diplomatic failures of the US administration and its allies. As a general rule, those who were critical of the decisions made by governments to send troops to Iraq are the most likely to support the release of the US diplomatic cables. The second factor has been the curious way in which information secrecy has come to operate in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the US. As one of the factors seen as leading to the 9/11 attacks was a lack of information sharing among various government agencies, there has been an intensified effort to share information more widely.

At the same time, the heightened concerns about security have seen more and more information being classified as confidential, and not to be circulated to the wider public. The result has been the creation of an absurdly large number of information 'insiders', at the same time as the arguments for withholding information to the public on the grounds related to "national security" have been extended far beyond what many would consider to be reasonable. Ben Eltham (2010) noted that the cache of US diplomatic cables had been distributed through the US government's SIPRINET (Secret Internet Router Protocol Network), which over two million US government officials had access to, and which had more than 180 US agencies signed up to by 2005. Eltham observed that:

> [i]n an ironic turn that Michel Foucault would surely have applauded, the sheer amount of information now hiding behind government and corporate firewalls makes this information increasingly vulnerable to disclosure … the wonder is that it hasn't been leaked sooner (2010).

As a general rule, those who have most vocally support the contribution of WikiLeaks to international diplomacy have also been the most highly critical of the engagement of the US and its allies in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and what has been seen as complicity of major media outlets in perceived official deceptions around these conflicts. Representative examples include John Pilger in *On Line Opinion* (a piece originally published in the *New Statesman*), and Jeff Sparrow in *The Drum*:

> Something has changed. Reality is no longer what the powerful say it is. Of all the spectacular revolts around the world, the most exciting is the insurrection of knowledge sparked by WikiLeaks (Pilger 2011).

> With the WikiLeaks cables, we're not discussing personal modesty. We're talking about decisions with real implications for a world we all have to live in … however embarrassing the US spokespeople might find it, WikiLeaks' enhanced pat-down is a good thing for democracy. There's some junk that just needs to be touched (Sparrow 2010a).

Making wider connections between politics, media and technology, Brian McNair drew attention to the extent that:

> What we see in WikiLeaks is the result of the dissolution of boundaries which hitherto kept information secure within nation states, within governments and their agencies, secret to all but a powerful few. Digital technology and the Internet have eroded those boundaries, accelerated the flow of information beyond the capacity of any institution to contain it for long, and dramatically increased its accessibility (2010).

The number of critics of WikiLeaks in terms of its impact on international diplomacy has been relatively few in the Australian

media. Michael Fullilove, Director of the Global Issues program at the Lowy Institute, argued at *The Drum* that the randomness with which WikiLeaks disclosed diplomatic information was disturbing, and the rationale for the dumping was incoherent, except as part of a general opposition to secrecy and closed-door diplomacy (Fullilove 2010). Russell Trood, a Liberal Senator, critiqued the WikiLeaks philosophy as being "grounded in a naïve conviction that complete transparency at every level will result in better government", and that "by attempting to impose transparency by force, WikiLeaks has probably set back the cause of open government by at least 10 years" (Trood 2010).

These were certainly minority voices, however, in contrast to the US, prosecution of Julian Assange did not become a *cause célèbre* issue among political conservatives. More common were the observations along the lines of Jeff Sparrow's point, also made on *The Drum*, that "If you're a democrat, it's a pretty basic principle: the public should know what the government does in its name" (Sparrow 2010a).

What WikiLeaks means for journalism?

The debate about what WikiLeaks has meant for journalism is strongly connected to questions related to media, democracy and the public sphere. McNair (2010) has argued that it revives the public sphere, albeit in a form that is considerably more global, virtual and pluralistic than how it was first envisaged by Habermas. The rise of WikiLeaks exemplifies a wider context of what McNair has termed *cultural chaos*, where digital media and ubiquitous computing power are shifting the boundaries between journalism and the wider society, from a context of information scarcity to one of information abundance (McNair 2006). The WikiLeaks releases have also raised issues about who and where are the investigative journalists of the 21st century, and whether, as Emily Bell from *The Guardian* put it, "this is the first real battleground between the political establishment and the open web … [which] forces journalists and news organisations to demonstrate to what extent they are now part of an establishment it is their duty to report" (Bell 2010). Writing in *The Drum*, Jeff Sparrow made the point that "WikiLeaks practices outsider journalism in a time when many reporters prefer to boast about being insiders" (Sparrow 2010b). Some of the discomfort that WikiLeaks generated among journalists was how it drew attention to the gaps between the democratic mission of journalism and the extent to which "journalists accustomed to walking the corridors of power are quite likely to end up sharing the attitudes and sensibilities of those they're supposed to scrutinize" (Sparrow 2010b) – a point that has been made by Daniel Hallin (1994), among others. In awarding Julian Assange the 2011 Martha Gelhorn Prize for Journalism,[1] the judges observed:

> WikiLeaks has been portrayed as a phenomenon of the hi-tech age, which it is. But it's much more. Its goal of justice through transparency is in the oldest and finest tradition of journalism. WikiLeaks has given the public more scoops than most journalists can imagine: a truth-telling that has empowered people all over the world. As publisher and editor, Julian Assange represents that which journalists once prided themselves in – he's brave, determined, independent: a true agent of people not of power (quoted in Deans, 2011).

The question of whether the activities of WikiLeaks are understood to be journalism has two dimensions. The first is a legal one. If the material published by WikiLeaks can be considered to legitimately constitute news, and therefore be in the public interest to make available, then WikiLeaks can be considered to be a publisher, which gives it considerable protections under laws pertaining to freedom of the press. In the US, where a case against WikiLeaks or Assange would be most likely to be pursued, the majority opinion of the US Supreme Court in the Pentagon Papers case in 1971 reinforced earlier judgments that the *Espionage Act* and other national security legislation did not trump the freedom of expression provisions in the First Amendment of the US Constitution unless it could be proven that "particular expression posed a clear and immanent danger of serious harm" (Peters 2011). Recognising that the journalism criteria has been critical to setting limits on the part of US government agencies to prosecute the organisation, WikiLeaks has described itself as a "not-for-profit media organization" that has adopted "journalism and ethical principles"; the words 'journalism' and 'journalist' appear 19 times in the 'About' page of WikiLeaks online site (Peters 2011). In his analysis of the legal questions arising from the WikiLeaks case, Yochai Benkler concludes that:

> as a matter of First Amendment doctrine, WikiLeaks is entitled to the protection available to a wide range of members of the Fourth Estate, from fringe pamphleteers to the major press organisations of the industrial information economy (Benkler 2011: 41).

The second relates to what WikiLeaks indicates about the future practice of journalism. While Julian Assange has argued in some publications that "it is not necessary to debate whether I am a journalist" (*The Guardian* 2010), he has also argued that WikiLeaks is the harbinger of a new form of "scientific journalism", allowing readers access to the primary documents from which journalists make interpretations of the factual data, and that it has reinvigorated the traditions of investigative journalism associated with the Pentagon Papers and the Watergate revelations. In an op-ed piece published in *The Australian* at the time of the release of the diplomatic cables, Assange described "scientific journalism" in these terms:

> WikiLeaks coined a new type of journalism: scientific journalism. We work with other media outlets to bring people the news, but also to prove it is true. Scientific journalism allows you to read a news story, then to click online to see the original document it is based on. That way you can judge for yourself: Is the story true? Did the journalist report it accurately? (2010).

In this respect, WikiLeaks can be seen as part of a wider range of trends in journalism, including citizen journalism (Flew & Wilson 2010), networked or open source journalism (Beckett 2008; Benkler 2011), and computational journalism. News outlets such as *The Guardian* have been pioneering the use of *computational journalism*, most notably in the UK parliamentary expenses scandal, where readers were encouraged to work through the large amounts of publicly available information to identify anomalies and potential matters of public interest (Flew et. al. 2012).

In Australia, a major inhibitor to the WikiLeaks release of the US diplomatic cables opening up wider debates about their implications for the future of journalism was the manner in which the Fairfax news media outlets chose to release them. [2] By staggering the release of the cables through a series of front-page 'scoops', the Fairfax editors essentially approached the cables as an exercise in a very traditional form of investigative journalism. In correspondence with the *SMH* editor-in-chief Peter Fray, the ABC's Jonathon Holmes identified that this was primarily for reasons of commercial advantage:

> The volume of material in the Australian referenced cables means we are still mining the source documents. There are, for instance, several potential stories in each cable; to put the material online would be to give access to our competitors in the local market (quoted in Holmes 2010).

The Fairfax approach to make the cables selectively available only after their own staff had extracted lead stories from them, was at odds with the spirit in which the material had been made available to mainstream media outlets by WikiLeaks, which Assange described as scientific journalism. Fairfax were under no obligations to adhere to Julian Assange's scientific journalism model in order to make use of the material provided. But in choosing to follow the very traditional path of using unique access to information to scoop their competitors, they missed the wider significance of the leaks over and above the information contained in the cables, which is the ability to make large amounts of information available electronically to the public, with only limited filtering and redaction by news journalists and editors. To use Brian McNair's (2006) terms, Fairfax were behaving in a manner consistent with journalism in an age of information scarcity, in an environment now characterised by information abundance.

WikiLeaks again drew attention to the simmering tension that has been a feature of the 2000s surrounding the question of who is a journalist. As the Internet has made it much easier for people to publish and distribute their own material, in the context of a more open and networked public sphere, there have been various attempts to draw a dichotomy between "professional/reliable" journalists "unprofessional/unreliable" bloggers or citizen journalists (see e.g. Knight 2008). Adler (2011) has observed in the US context the "somewhat muted" defences of WikiLeaks among organisations representing journalists and publishers in the US, where very general arguments for the need to protect a free press co-existed with a dislike for public advocacy on the part of journalists, opposition to Assange's openly advocacy-driven mission, and opposition to Assange's methods. In Australia, the bulk of the commentary on what WikiLeaks might mean for journalism took place either on the ABC's *The Drum* or outside of the mainstream news media in the new online-only media outlets. [3] Having been the sole recipient of the US diplomatic cables, the Fairfax media organisations somewhat curiously took themselves out of the wider debates about how journalism in the 21st century would differ from that of the 20th century by handling the cables suggested that they saw no real differences, despite the very different manner in which such information had found its way to them as compared to traditional journalistic techniques. Jonathon Holmes (2010) made the point that claims made about commercial advantage were

> not a line of reasoning that has prevented *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *Der Spiegel*, *Le Monde* or any other of WikiLeaks' collaborators from posting cables to support their stories … we're having to take them [Fairfax journalists] on trust, and we shouldn't have to (Holmes 2010).

Alan Kohler, publisher of the *Business Spectator*, made the point at *The Drum* that the mission that WikiLeaks declares itself to have – "to get the unvarnished truth out to the public" – did not apply in the Australian instance "where it was first handed to Fairfax to be published" (Kohler, 2010). It is in this context that Kohler concluded that "this time the material was given to a few newspapers first so that it would make a splash; next time, or perhaps the time after that, it won't have to be" (Kohler, 2010).

WikiLeaks and democracy: the WikiLeaks effect

For many of the supporters of WikiLeaks, its contribution to democracy is self-evident. As noted earlier, *ABC Drum* contributor Jeff Sparrow argued that "If you're a democrat, it's a pretty basic principle: the public should know what the government does in its name" (Sparrow 2010a), and WikiLeaks facilitates the more open flow of public information. In awarding its Gold Medal to Julian Assange, the Sydney Peace Foundation's director, Stuart Rees, observed that:

> Assange's work is in the Tom Paine *Rights of Man* and Daniel Ellsberg *Pentagon Papers* tradition- challenging the old order of power in politics and in journalism. Assange has championed people's right to know and has challenged the centuries old tradition that governments are entitled to keep the public in a state of ignorance. In the Paine, Ellsberg and Assange cases, those in power moved quickly to silence their critics even by perverting the course of justice (Sydney Peace Foundation 2011).

The comparison to Tom Paine has also been made by John Pilger (2011), and in awarding the Sydney Peace Prize to Assange, former SBS journalist Mary Kostakidis described WikiLeaks as "an ingenious and heroic website that has shifted the power balance between citizen and the state by exposing what governments really get up to in our name." In receiving the award, Assange described WikiLeaks as being "engaged in a … generational struggle for a proposition that citizens have a right and a duty to scrutinise the state" (Sydney Peace Foundation 2011).

It should be noted that, in Australia, writers from both the political left and right found common cause in supporting Assange, in contrast to the US. Some made the point that, as an Australian citizen, Assange had the right to expect assistance from his government when facing criminal charges in another country, and found the hostile reaction of the Gillard Labor government to be inappropriate (Turnbull 2010; Trood 2010; Haigh & Tranter 2010). [4] Several avowed conservatives declared themselves to

be WikiLeaks supporters, not least because many of the cables reflected poorly on members of the current Labor government. The former Liberal leader and current Shadow Minister for Communications, Malcolm Turnbull, cautioned that "Governments and politicians should be careful not to make a martyr of Assange and fools of themselves" (Turnbull 2010). Former Liberal MP Ross Cameron argued that

> Assange is forcing us to rethink our assumptions about how much protection the ordinary person needs from the truth … the democratic project was founded on the principles of transparency and trust but has been overtaken by a culture of secrecy and spin (Cameron 2011).

Cameron also argued that debating the pros and cons of WikiLeaks and Assange missed the wider point that they:

> represent something much bigger … the arrival of the Internet, with its ability not just to reach a wider audience instantly, but to recruit millions of people to the task of collecting, correcting and disseminating knowledge has seen an irreversible shift and devolution in power (Cameron 2011).

In a similar vein, *The Economist*'s anonymous American blogger defended Assange against the criticism of cyberpunk luminary Bruce Sterling that Assange was an irresponsible "crypto-utopian", arguing that:

> the silver couch-surfer's philosophy appears to be some sort of mundane, mainstream democratic liberalism … Julian Assange and his confederates have made dull liberal principles seem once again sexily subversive by exposing power's reactionary panic when a few people with a practical bent actually bother to take them seriously (*The Economist* 2010).

At the same time, there were those on the left who were more critical of Assange and WikiLeaks. In some instances, this was related to the circumstances of Assange's arrest in London, which was not on espionage charges, but in relation to allegations of sexual assault relating to prior sexual encounters in Sweden. The debate on WikiLeaks on the Australian left blog *Larvatus Prodeo* (larvartusprodeo.net) was an example of this, where it was argued that the charges could not simply be dismissed as arising from a political conspiracy (see also Dalton 2010; Brull 2011).

A different line of criticism from the left was developed by Guy Rundle, writing in *Crikey*. Rundle distinguished between what he termed the "WikiLeaks effect", or a generalised process of using digital media technologies to challenge power relations through the release of information into the public domain, and the developing scenario at WikiLeaks itself, where:

> the very methods that WikiLeaks has had to legitimately undertake to lead the cables out, and keep them in the public eye, has brought it at times close to being the sort of Le Carresque info deal that its very process is meant to render obsolete (Rundle 2010).

Rundle's critique is similar to that made by Geert Lovink and Patrice Riemens (2010), who observed that WikiLeaks was an example of what they refer to as a Single Person Organisation (SPO) based upon charismatic leadership. They argue that

> SPOs are recognizable, exciting, inspiring, and easy to feature in the media. Their sustainability, however, is largely dependent on the actions of their charismatic leader, and their functioning is difficult to reconcile with democratic values. This is also why they are difficult to replicate and do not scale up easily (Lovink & Riemens 2010).

Robert Manne argued that Assange's 'cypherpunk' ideology should not be read as a variant of mainstream liberalism, but as a more radical critique of the state that identifies computer technologies as being at the centre of the contemporary information war (Manne 2011). It is in this aspect of Assange's radicalism that led Paul Monk to compare WikiLeaks unfavourably to Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers in *The Australian*, arguing that whereas Ellsberg released the classified documents as someone who believed that the US government had taken a wrong turn in relation to the Vietnam War and that it was his role to help that government learn from its mistakes, Assange's aim is to disrupt US diplomacy and render the state – and other states – more dysfunctional in their ability to conduct their affairs (Monk 2011).

In these debates, there are two conflicting conceptions of the role of public information in relation to power in liberal democratic societies. One views the role of public information as being one of enabling the polity to work better, viewing societies that are more democratic as also being more effective across a number of criteria. This would be a liberal interpretation of the public sphere. The other argues that the state, the media and the corporate sector have become more and more embedded with one another, and that withholding information from the public has become central to their *modus operandi*. In this latter worldview, what is needed to challenge centralised power is what Jeff Sparrow refers to as the "journalist as outlaw" (Sparrow 2010b). Chris Berg argued that WikiLeaks walks both sides of this fence: it aims both to be a repository of data and documents, providing a safe haven for whistleblowers, and it has an activist agenda in relation to particular campaigns, such as pushing for the exit of US troops from Afghanistan and Iraq (Berg, 2010).

A variant of this argument, presented from the other side of the political divide, was made by Slavoj Zizek, published at (of all places!) the ABC's Religion and Ethics site. In this essay, Zizek argues that WikiLeaks is caught between "the radical act of publishing secret state documents", and its recuperation as "another chapter in the glorious history of the struggle for the 'free flow of information' and the 'citizens right to know.'" In the latter instance it runs the risk of becoming little more than "a radical case of 'investigative journalism'", and a project akin to that depicted in Hollywood films such as *All the President's Men*, where "corruption is shown to reach the very top, yet the ideology of such works resides in their optimistic final message: What a great country ours must be, when a couple of ordinary people can bring down the President of the US" (Zizek 2011). Zizek's argument is similar to that of Guy Rundle: to the extent that WikiLeaks comes to represent something more than a "sort of mundane, mainstream democratic liberalism", it needs to articulate its radical informational project to social

movements seeking change in other spheres of public life.

Considering the relationship of WikiLeaks to a broadening and deepening of democracy, as distinct from an affirmation of liberal democracy in the face of complacent media, raises the question of Julian Assange as the public face of WikiLeaks. Much of the criticism of WikiLeaks that has been published over the last 18 months centres on the apparently autocratic tendencies of the most famous Australian news publisher since Rupert Murdoch, often by disaffected former comrades such as Daniel Domscheit-Berg (who since set up his own rival organisation, *OpenLeaks*). Among the evidence provided is the well-known response of Assange to one of his colleagues who questioned his decision to suspend Domscheit-Berg:

> I am the heart and soul of this organization, its founder, philosopher, spokesperson, original coder, organizer, financier and all the rest. If you have a problem with me, piss off (quoted in Poulsen & Zetter 2010).

A lot of this is prurient, and in some instances malicious – as argued by Benkler (2011) in relation to profiles of Assange published in *The New York Times* – but it nonetheless raises interesting questions about the ethics of democratic practice. A defining feature of Assange and his colleagues has been their roots in computer hacking cultures. The many works on hackers and hacking cultures point to a high degree of idealism but also a strand of elitism. Disdain for those who set up hackable digital media sites also goes with a consciousness that, by nature of the complex work involved in understanding computer code, only a small sub-set of the population could ever be hackers. By nature of what is involved, the public could never be engaged as full co-participants in hacking culture, and Lovink and Riemans found an element of this in WikiLeaks and its approach to oppositional social movements:

> WikiLeaks is … an organization deeply shaped by 1980s hacker culture, combined with the political values of techno-libertarianism that emerged in the 1990s. The fact that WikiLeaks was founded – and to a large extent is still run – by hard-core geeks is essential to understanding its values and moves … this brand of idealism (or, if you prefer, anarchism) is paired with a preference for conspiracies, an elitist attitude and a cult of secrecy (never mind condescension). This is not conducive to collaboration with like-minded people and groups, who are relegated to being the simple consumers of WikiLeaks output (Lovink & Riemens 2010).

The ethical dimension of WikiLeakswas also raised by Pesce (2010) and Manne (2011), who noted the interesting affinity between hackers and security agencies: the former present themselves as the sworn enemies of the latter, but the relationship between the two is akin to that of the old *Mad* magazine "Spy vs. Spy" comics, where the opponent is beaten using methods that render the victor indistinguishable from their foe. At the same time, and perhaps paradoxically, WikiLeaks was also equipped for the element of media that is based around celebrity culture. Julian Assange became the public face and official spokesperson for WikiLeaks, but Mark Pesce asked "Why does WikiLeaks *need* a public face?", if it functions at least in part as a dropbox service that provides anonymity to whistleblowers. The fact that Assange was its public face has meant that the fate of Assange in dealing with the UK courts and the future of WikiLeaks became imbricated in ways that don't automatically follow from what the site actually does.

When pointing to any limitations of WikiLeaks as an instrument for democratising the networked public sphere, we need to be aware of what can be termed the "WikiLeaks Effect", or the "Assange Effect", which is here to stay regardless of what happens to the site. Lovink and Riemens concluded that

> if something like it did not exist, it would have to be invented. The quantitative – and what looks soon to become the qualitative – turn of information overload is a fact of contemporary life … To organize and interpret this Himalaya of data is a collective challenge that is clearly out there, whether we give it the name 'WikiLeaks' or not" (Lovink & Riemens 2010).

It brings together in a single, concentrated case study a wider set of forces around movements to use the Internet to achieve greater political transparency, the challenges of what Benkler terms the "networked fourth estate" to the practices of mainstream political journalism, and the possibility of thinking anew about democracy in an age of social media that recognises the limitations of representative models and the possibilities of more 'monitory' and participatory approaches. [5]

Conclusion

This paper has drawn upon debates about the theory of the public sphere and its relationship to political society to provide a framework through which to evaluate the significance of WikiLeaks in general, and its release of over 250,000 US diplomatic cables in November 2010 in particular. In outlining Jürgen Habermas's original conception of the public sphere, it was noted that three debates that have arisen have been: whether the Internet is enabling the development of virtual public spheres; whether public spheres increasingly operate on a global rather than a national basis; and whether we need to speak in terms of plural and contested public spheres and agonistic politics rather than a unified and critical-rational public sphere. In all of these instances, WikiLeaks provides a particularly interesting and important case study.

Our case study approach was somewhat counter-intuitive in that we focused upon reactions to the WikiLeaks release of the US diplomatic cables in the Australian media. While noting the claims made for WikiLeaks as a precursor to a global and virtual counter-public sphere, we drew upon the fact that its founder Julian Assange is an Australian – perhaps the most famous Australian in the global news media business since Rupert Murdoch – to consider whether there were distinctive elements of the Australian coverage of the events. We drew upon the online news sites of major Australian newspapers as well as on online-only sites, and our focus was on opinion and commentary rather than straight news reportage. We framed the discussion around three issues: WikiLeaks and the challenge of "radical transparency" to international diplomacy; the implications of WikiLeaks for journalism; and WikiLeaks and democracy, including debates about the organisation and its leader and public face, Julian Assange.

Whatever one makes of the ethics of releasing diplomatic cables, and whether organisations such as WikiLeaks can be entrusted not to put lives in danger in the process of doing so, there seems little doubt that it has revived an understanding of journalism as being about promoting radical transparency and challenging government secrecy in foreign policy. In that respect, it is consistent with earlier traditions of investigative journalism, such as the publication of the Pentagon Papers in 1971, updating such techniques to an age of digital networks and ubiquitous information.

Whether Julian Assange's notion of a "secrecy tax" provides a meaningful frame through which to interpret such acts of information warfare can be debated, but there is little doubt that it identified and acted upon what in retrospect was a large contradiction in national security policies, of simultaneously promoting large amounts of information among 'insiders' while withholding more and more material from public view. It would take little in such a context for an insider to turn critic and be able to release vast amounts of confidential information into the public domain. The fact that so much of this was occurring in the context of particularly unpopular wars in Afghanistan and Iraq made it likelier, but it was WikiLeaks who were the "first movers" into this politicised informational space.

One feature of the Australian reaction was that there was little in the way of calls for punitive action against Assange in the media, even among political conservatives. Indeed, the call on the part of the Gillard Labor government for criminal action to be pursued against Assange and WikiLeaks seems to have generated views across the political spectrum that, regardless of debates about the merits of the actions taken, Assange warranted appropriate forms of support and protection as an Australian citizen. Moreover, in so far as WikiLeaks provides a securely encrypted framework for large-scale whistleblowing through the leaking of large amounts of digital data, there will be a lot more of such activities in the near future: we can speak of a "WikiLeaks Effect" or an "Assange Effect" in information counter-flows that exists almost independently of the nature of the person or organisation that chooses to pursue such avenues.

The impact of WikiLeaks on journalism is considerable, and greater than many in mainstream news media outlets are prepared to openly acknowledge. It is not simply that WikiLeaks is associated with a new form of investigative journalism where access to data displaces access to sources as a driver of new information (recognising that one still needs to 'inside' sources to get this particular data). It is more that its rise to prominence, which was not as sudden as it may first appear, raised uncomfortable questions about why mainstream news journalists were not doing more of this investigative work themselves. For those who criticise contemporary journalism for accommodating itself to readily to the realities of power and influence, as a condition for a privileged 'insider' status, WikiLeaks was a potent reminder of what can be achieved by the determined outsider to such regimes of power and influence.

At the same time, the release of the US diplomatic cables in November 2010 relied upon a relationship to key mainstream news outlets, and the manner in which they were dealt with varied considerably among these. While some, most notably *The Guardian* in the UK, have seen in the practices of WikiLeaks some pointers towards the future of journalism, others such as the Fairfax media in Australia failed to connect the innovations of WikiLeaks to the material provided, preferring instead to try and maintain the increasingly tenuous dichotomy between professional journalists and everyone else in the networked public sphere. As a number of Australian writers pointed out, such approaches will only serve to accelerate the decline in the 21st century of newspapers as we have known them.

On the question of WikiLeaks and democracy, a significant difference exists between those who view the actions of WikiLeaks as part of what *The Economist* referred to as "mundane, mainstream democratic liberalism", and hence within longstanding traditions of whistleblowing and investigative journalism that is consistent with liberal democracy, or whether it points towards new kinds of radical informational project and oppositional counter-publics. Interestingly, it is those taking the latter view, such as Guy Rundle in *Crikey*, who have argued that a cult of secrecy within WikiLeaks with its roots in hacker subcultures acts as a barrier to connecting up the WikiLeaks project to social movements seeking change in other spheres of public life and politics. At the time in which this paper was being completed, a further 251,000 US diplomatic cables were released from the WikiLeaks site in an unredacted format, meaning that confidential information about diplomatic informants could be derived directly from the cables. WikiLeaks blamed *The Guardian* for the leaks, arguing that it had divulged a secret password in a 2011 book published by its journalists (BBC 2011). For critics of WikiLeaks on the basis of its lack of accountability for the use of sensitive materials, this action would support their questioning of the organisation as well placed to take over the role of traditional news media. At the same time, it points to how online information can be virally disseminated in ways that go beyond not only the traditional media gatekeepers, but also putative new ones such as WikiLeaks.

The case study provided here about WikiLeaks as a new form of globally networked public sphere, and how it was understood in the Australian news media, has pointed to wider issues concerning the ethics of democratic practice. WikiLeaks is a highly relevant case study in the issues that arise around Keane's (2009) conception of democracy taking an increasingly 'monitory' form, Castells' (2009) understanding of power and citizenship as increasingly networked and global, and Benkler's (2006; 2011) notion of a networked public sphere. Around all of these theories of the 21st century polity in an age of networked global media and a more open and participatory media culture lies the question of who may be the new champions of the public sphere and democratic ideals if it is not traditional parliamentary representatives, political parties and large-scale news media outlets. The case of WikiLeaks presents us with a picture of both the opportunities and limitations that arise from computer hackers taking on the role of investigative journalists, and stepping into the networked space of the contemporary, and increasingly global, public sphere.

Footnotes

1 The Martha Gellhorn Prize for Journalism is awarded for factual journalism in English that exposes establishment propaganda. (Ed. Note)

2 The Fairfax media organisation are publishers of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *The Age* (Melbourne) and the *Australian Financial Review*, and owners of a range of other newspaper, magazine, radio and online media properties. The WikiLeaks material was published in *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*.

3 This is not to say that media outlets were opposed to what Assange had done: the editors of most major Australian newspapers signed an open letter to Prime Minister Julia Gillard, through the Walkley Foundation, opposing prosecution of Assange in Australia or the US, on the grounds that WikiLeaks was "doing what the media have always done: bringing to light material that governments would prefer to keep secret" (MEAA 2010). It is to say that, in the terms used by Benkler (2011: 61-64), the approach of Fairfax and other mainstream media was akin to that of *The New York Times*, in publishing the WikiLeaks material but distancing itself from the organization and its approach to information gathering, as distinct from *The Guardian*'s "strategic embrace of the networked models of journalism" (Benkler 2011: 63).

4 Almost immediately after the release of the cables, the Attorney-General Robert McClelland announced that the Australian Federal Police would conduct an investigation into Assange and WikiLeaks, and would fully co-operate with US authorities in their criminal investigations. McClelland also indicating that Assange may have his Australian passport revoked and be arrested if he returned to Australia, while Prime Minister Julia Gillard declared the release of the cables to be 'illegal', although it was not clear what Australian laws may have actually been broken.

5 The term "monitory democracy" is used by John Keane; see *The Life and Death of Democracy* (2009). Eltham (2010) discussed WikiLeaks as an experiment in monitory democracy.

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