

✦ **“Pls Call, Love, Your Wife”: the online response to WikiLeaks’ 9/11 pager messages**

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**Abstract**

This article explores Twitter and online forum discussions of WikiLeaks’ November 2009 leak of 9/11 pager messages, placing them in the context of ongoing debates about the meaning of 9/11, about online privacy, and about the presentation of online information. I argue that the real-time online response to this leak was articulated according to five primary interpretive frames: an affective frame characterised by a purely emotional response to the messages; a privacy frame which focused on the legal and moral implications of violating the privacy of pagers users; a history frame which saw the messages primarily as an online historical archive; a data frame which focused on the messages as a data set to be aggregated and visualised; and a conspiracy frame which saw them as potential evidence of a 9/11 cover-up. This polysemic response to the 9/11 pager messages, I suggest, stems partly from the way in which 9/11 has been inscribed into cultural memory. At the same time, the response also foreshadows the more recent interpretive conflicts over WikiLeaks’ releases that have led media figures, activists, and scholars to question the effectiveness of the WikiLeaks’ project of provoking reform through the release of classified or suppressed data.

**Introduction**

In late November of 2009, the transparency activist organisation WikiLeaks released 578,000 textual pager messages dating from September 11, 2001. The pager messages – all from Manhattan or surrounding boroughs – were a combination of routine pages, emergency response activity, and attempts to locate friends, family and colleagues in the wreckage of the Twin Towers. Like most of WikiLeaks’ material, the messages had been illegally obtained and anonymously sent to the site for publication. Unlike prior WikiLeaks releases however, they were published in a manner calculated to draw wide public attention. Departing from their customary practice of uploading a document file to their main site, WikiLeaks created a separate website for the pager leak, 911.WikiLeaks.org.<sup>1</sup> There, a steady stream of messages were published between 3 a.m. on November 25th and 3 a.m. on November 26, with WikiLeaks synchronising release times to the exact moment when the pager messages were first sent.

Over the course of the day, as media outlets took note of the leak, thousands of curious visitors flocked to 911.WikiLeaks.org in order to watch the messages unspool. From the evening before the first message’s publication until late the following day, those who read the pager messages also gathered online to discuss their significance. Using the hashtag #911txts on Twitter, or visiting forums such as *Reddit* or sites like *The Huffington Post*, they debated the meaning of the leaks, disseminated what they thought were particularly important messages, and responded ethically and emotionally to the discovery of publicly available messages from government officials and private citizens caught up in the chaos of 9/11.

This article focuses on this online response. Drawing on a Twitter archive,<sup>2</sup> forum posts and blog comments, I explore how several pre-existing debates — including debates over the meaning of 9/11, over the consequences of online privacy invasion, and over the value of WikiLeaks’ overall project - prompted markedly different responses to the messages. Placed in the context of such debates, the online response to the pager leak can be seen as an illuminating snapshot of public response to 9/11 eight years on. As this article goes to press, the 10th anniversary of the September 11 attacks has provoked fresh interest in how the event has been enshrined in public memory, and this snapshot will hopefully add to that emerging conversation.

My intention however, is not merely to focus on the representation of 9/11, my discussion of the online conversation about the pager leak is equally intended to highlight the difficulty of trying to create consensual meaning about raw data. As I will show, while those who discussed the pager messages on the day of their release largely accepted WikiLeaks’ assertion that the messages were genuine, they disagreed about the interpretation of the pager messages, the messages’ appropriate mode of delivery, and the reason that WikiLeaks had released the messages to the public. Perhaps the most striking of these interpretive disagreements had to do with WikiLeaks’ own motives for releasing the material – though the leak was

characterised by WikiLeaks as being of largely historical interest, a portion of the online audience assumed that WikiLeaks had intended the leak to dispute the official story of the 9/11 attacks. This polysemic response to the 9/11 pager messages, I suggest, stems partly from the way in which 9/11 has been inscribed into cultural memory. At the same time, the response also foreshadows the more recent interpretive conflicts over WikiLeaks' releases that have led media figures, activists, and scholars to question the effectiveness of the WikiLeaks' project of provoking reform through the release of classified or suppressed data.

### **Leaking in search of an audience: WikiLeaks and the media before "Collateral Murder"**

In April of 2010, American journalists and international correspondents wedged into a crowded press conference in Washington D.C.'s National Press Club, waiting to hear WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange announce a highly anticipated leak of a US military video that his organisation had obtained and de-encrypted – the so-called "Collateral Murder" video. Though most US and international journalists had scarcely heard of WikiLeaks before that moment, this was about to change.<sup>3</sup>

Over the next few months, the group began to release an unprecedented cache of leaked material pertaining to US military and diplomatic activities, coordinating with an evolving series of media partners including *The New York Times*, *Die Spiegel*, *The Guardian*, and Al Jazeera. Despite friction between Assange and these partners,<sup>4</sup> the relationships resulted in a flood of media coverage of both WikiLeaks' material and of the organisation's structure and goals. By the end of 2011, WikiLeaks worked with dozens of media outlets around the world to release US diplomatic cables, while at the same time Assange himself became a media celebrity – in part due to his compelling and articulate persona, but also as a result of accusations of Swedish charges of sexual misconduct that led to house arrest in Britain and possible extradition. For better or worse, the overwhelming majority of those who became acquainted with WikiLeaks during 2010-2011 learned about the organisation through coverage in the mainstream media.

Given the intense media coverage of WikiLeaks, its releases, and its mercurial founder, it is easy to overlook the fact that between 2006 and 2009 the organisation labored in comparative obscurity. Few mainstream journalists consulted the site regularly, and (aside from a minor media blitz when the site's US domain was shut by a California judge in 2008) reporters who did tend to focus on the WikiLeaks' more accessible disclosures, often showing little interest in the organisation responsible for disseminating them. This indifference did not go unnoticed by WikiLeaks: the group sometimes used Twitter to complain about the media's lack of interest in a particular leak or their unwillingness to cite WikiLeaks as the source of the material.<sup>5</sup> At a December 2008 speech at the annual hacker convention Chaos Communication Congress, Assange disparaged journalists as being unwilling or unable to understand the importance of many leaked documents, noting that "what you hear about in the media (from WikiLeaks) are items of the greatest salacious interest" (Assange 2008).

Yet, apart from the group's tactics of giving a heads-up to an occasional reporter, WikiLeaks did not do much on their own to galvanise media interest in their activities – in fact, reporters sometimes had difficulty contacting the organisation for interviews about leaks (Lynch 2009). Given this tendency for WikiLeaks to keep a low profile, the orchestrations around the release of the pager messages marked a distinct shift in method. Though both the effort involved and the subsequent media response remained relatively moderate, the attempt to generate media interest in the pager leak was a first step towards a redefined media strategy designed to attract more attention from legacy media outlets and thus, the public at large.

WikiLeaks' approach to publicising the pager leaks included outreach to legacy media as well as direct outreach to followers using Twitter as a promotion tool. Though there is no public record of WikiLeaks' media strategy, media coverage of the leak suggests several media outlets had advance, embargoed access to the material. *Wired* published an advance piece on the leaks on the magazine's *Threat Level* blog, and CBS.com's computer security columnist Declan McCullagh published a detailed report on the leaks on the morning of the 25. In turn, WikiLeaks linked to the CBS.com story on their Twitter stream, describing it as a "great initial analysis", and also linked to a *The Guardian* story written using the *Wired* piece as a source.

If the increased effort to court legacy media anticipated WikiLeaks' future media collaborations, their use of Twitter to publicise the pager leak reflected a growing interest in the possibilities of the communications platform that equally foreshadowed the important role Twitter would soon play in the organisation's day-to-day activities. WikiLeaks had actively maintained a Twitter account since February of 2009, and by the date of the pager leak had acquired 14,500 followers – a fraction of the nearly one million followers they had amassed as of mid-2011, but still a steadily increasing cohort. For the most part, these followers signed on because their interests in computer culture or information freedom had led them independently to WikiLeaks, or because a specific leak had led them to become curious or concerned about the site.<sup>6</sup> A number of journalists had also begun to follow WikiLeaks on Twitter over the course of 2009, but the Twitter feed, like the WikiLeaks site, was not heavily trafficked by the mainstream press.

Prior to the 9/11 pager leak, WikiLeaks had begun to tentatively explore the power of Twitter as a means of routing around traditional media outlets, sending out direct links to their own material and drawing attention to instances when WikiLeaks material was covered by alternative media or in the blogosphere. But the Twitter campaign around the pager messages was the most aggressive promotion WikiLeaks had attempted. Two days before the release, WikiLeaks announced the nature of the leak, tweeting that "3AM Tuesday, NY Time, we will release >500k intercepted 9/11 text msgs live over 24h, synced to their original intercept."<sup>7</sup> The evening before the leak, WikiLeaks used Twitter to draw attention to the use of a separate website for the event: "WikiLeaks to release over half a million 9/11 intercepts <http://911.WikiLeaks.org/>" Soon after the website launched, WikiLeaks tweeted that "Live broadcast of half million 9/11 pager intercepts has started <http://911.WikiLeaks.org/>." As the day progressed, WikiLeaks announced impending "real-time" events from 9/11 in the manner of historical re-enactment: "Plane impact in 1.5 hours, 8:45 EST, #911txts [http://911.WikiLeaks.org](http://911.WikiLeaks.org/) holding firm." "WTC south tower will collapse in 1 minute. <http://911.WikiLeaks.org/>." Over the next few weeks, the group tracked down all media references to the pager leak and tweeted links of the articles.

In addition to using Twitter as a means to announce the pager leak's arrival, progression and outcome, WikiLeaks capitalised on the ability of Twitter to publicise events by establishing the hashtag #911txts as a platform for discussing the messages. The use of a hashtag was equally novel for WikiLeaks, perhaps partly inspired by a recent case in which a hashtag (#Trafigura) had been used successfully by WikiLeaks and others to protest a British press injunction.<sup>8</sup> In comparison, WikiLeaks was only moderately successful in building critical mass around the #911txts hashtag, in part due to their own method of deployment (the tag was applied inconsistently in their own feed, though 911. WikiLeaks.org directed readers to use it to discuss the material). #911txts did not become one of the day's most popular, or 'trending' hashtags, accumulating just over 1500 tweets over the course of two days. Still, the hashtag consolidated the online conversation, and attracted lurkers who followed the tag adding their own remarks. The resulting traffic created a strong enough Twitter presence to attract further followers to WikiLeaks. On the day following the leak, the organisation's Twitter follower count jumped by 2000, and on the following day by about 1000 – over a 20 percent increase in followers over the course of two days. Assuming that only a small percentage of those followed the event on Twitter would have been motivated to follow WikiLeaks, this jump in numbers suggests the extent to which Twitter became a forum for discussing the pager messages.

As a primary destination for those actively discussing the 9/11 leaks, the #911txts hashtag can thus be considered a representative sample of public online response to the pager leaks. A coding analysis was performed on approximately 1,500 tweets posted this hashtag from the 24-hour period following the messages' release. This analysis revealed that those who responded to the pager messages using this hashtag gravitated towards five interpretive frames: first, an affective frame characterised by a purely emotional response to the messages; second, a privacy frame which focused on the legal and moral implications of violating the privacy of pagers users; third, a history frame which saw the messages primarily as a historical archive; fourth, a data frame which focused on the messages as a data set to be aggregated and visualised; and a fifth, a conspiracy frame which saw them as potential evidence of a 9/11 cover-up. In what follows, I expand on each of these framings and provide examples of their manifestation, beginning with the frame shaped by what I argue has been the dominant media narrative of 9/11 over the past decade: the pager messages as a tale of personal tragedy and personal heroism.

### **Mediating the pager messages: 9/11 as public drama and the affective frame**

Media and communications scholars have written extensively about US media coverage of the 9/11 attacks, focusing on the role of such coverage in shaping public understanding of the event, its causes, and its consequences. Much of this analysis has noted the intensely personal nature of 9/11 reporting, not only at the time of the attack, but in anniversary features and in stories that reference the ongoing struggles of victims. In particular, scholars have focused on what Marita Sturken has described as the "compulsive repetition" in the media of some of the more horrific details surrounding the collapse of the Twin Towers (Sturken 2004). This continual reference to the events of 9/11 has been seen as at once cathartic (Kitch 2003; Kaplan 2005), allowing for collective ritual mourning; and manipulative (Kellner 2004; Nacos 2007; Grusins 2004), fostering a sense of continual fear and vigilance in post-9/11 America. As well, the commemorative focus of media coverage has been seen as an implicit valorisation of US domestic and foreign policy: as David Simpson noted in *9/11: The Culture of Commemoration*:

The deaths of 9/11... occurred within a culture of commemoration that was already primed to resort to sanctification and personalization in the cause of upholding the image of a flourishing civil society and a providential national destiny... (Simpson 2006: 31).

Even as it appropriates 9/11 as part of the US political imaginary, the persistent foregrounding of the personal drama in the mass media has also depoliticised 9/11 by eliding connections between the event and to the long history of US foreign policy. In *The Shock of the News*, Brian Monahan (2010) describes this depoliticised coverage as a form of "public drama". According to Monahan, the emotional nature of the coverage transformed it from a political event into a story of personal loss and heroism, and thus

allowed the dramatic, emotional, theatrical and simplistic representation of this complex and consequential historical moment to influence how political leaders, media officials and others have constructed and used the dominant notions of 9/11 in the years since" (Monahan 2010: 10).

Though Monahan's work focuses on US coverage of the event, a similar argument has been made concerning international coverage of 9/11 that focused on the personal drama of 9/11 victims at the expense of critical assessment of US actions before or after the event (Pludowski et al. 2007).

Over the past decade, media outlets have re-staged the "public drama" of 9/11 not only through replaying news footage from the original event, but through the dramatisation of evidence released afterwards as the result of investigations or legal actions. In 2006, for example, the Fire Department of New York released the 911 calls placed on 9/11 in response to a FOIA request from *The New York Times* and 9/11 victims' groups. Though the portions of the calls in which the voices of private citizens could be heard were largely redacted, the calls still contained the attempts of operators to calm their desperate and often dying interlocutors. Media responses to these releases focused in large part on their emotional intensity, using the recordings as a means to revisit the dying moments of 9/11 victims or the heroism of responders. *The Washington Post*, *USA Today* and National Public Radio (NPR) embedded audio recordings of particularly dramatic phone calls, including excerpts of a particularly unnerving exchange between Melissa Doi (a 31-year-old systems manager trapped in the World Trade Center) and a 911 operator, in which Doi died while on the phone.

For media audiences listening to these recordings, these harrowing calls facilitated a sense of connection to the drama of 9/11 while reinforcing a reading of the event as a narrative of victimhood and heroism. Intentionally or not, by releasing 9/11 pager messages in a form which suggested historical reenactment,<sup>9</sup> WikiLeaks was similarly participating in the fostering of the

public drama around 9/11. Predictably, reportage in *The Guardian*, BBC, MSNBC and elsewhere focused on republishing messages that related to the personal tragedy of the event; the headline of *The Guardian* article, in fact, was the pager message "Plane has hit WTC. Pls call, love, your wife" (Pilkington 2009). In the most explicit example of repurposing the messages as public drama, CNN deployed voiceover actors to narrate particularly poignant messages while archive images from the collapse of the Twin Towers played on the screen. Though WikiLeaks described CNN's video as "somewhat sensationalist", they were pleased enough by the attention to link to the video on their Twitter stream.<sup>10</sup>

Given this context for their presentation, it is understandable that Twitter users who used the #911txts hashtag to record their observations about the WikiLeaks pager release often described their experiences of the messages in emotional terms, seeing them as an affective extension of the public drama of 9/11. These observers tweeted and re-tweeted messages that gave evidence of personal tragedy, sometimes including their commentary on the feeling that the message provoked as they read it. One observer rebroadcast the pager message "ARE YOU OK? PLEASE EMAIL OR CALL. WHAT FLOOR IS JOSH ON?" and added the comment "it is agonizing to wonder whether they are alright." Expressions of sadness were common. Some observers experienced this sadness as cathartic: "brought to tears today 2x by @WikiLeaks #9/11txts! Pls hug up your family for Thanksgiving & pray for peace", while others claimed the messages were making them too sad to continue. "Must stop - making me sad;" one noted; and another wrote "Read through #911txts until I hit 'I love you daddy' and had to stop. Still just a little raw."

The Twitter conversation about the affective content of the messages was also divided between those who encountered the pager messages in the media or on Twitter, and those who chose to devote a portion of their day to following the time-released messages at 911.WikiLeaks.com. The second group sometimes described their reading of messages throughout the day as a "compulsive" or "obsessive" act: one observer asked, "is anyone else reading obsessively reading the #911txts?" The fact that the leak coincided with the US Thanksgiving holiday meant that for some US observers such compulsive reading competed with holiday activities. One follower noted that he was "reading the 9/11 pages and watching the Lions and the Packers", suggesting he was unable to stop reading the messages, yet was not sufficiently moved by them to consider pausing the match.

#### **"Creepy voyeurism type thing": pager messages through the privacy frame**

As affective responses to the pager messages accumulated in the #911txts hashtag stream, some who were following the hashtag expressed their discomfort with this mode of engagement. In their ambivalence towards – or outright condemnation of – those who focused on the emotional content of the pager messages, these sceptical observers demonstrated the tension between the affective frame, which seemed to mandate witnessing and shared grieving; and the privacy frame, which recast witnessing as voyeurism. This tension was made explicit in a comment suggesting that reading the pager leaks insulted the privacy of the dead: "OK seriously I don't thinking its right to reveal 9/11 text messages. Show some respect. People died." By framing the messages primarily as privacy violation, observers suggested that affective responses were disrespectful, not empathetic. One tweet noted there was a "creepy voyeurism type thing going on with #911txts: have people nothing better to do?" while another observer claimed that "the whole WikiLeaks #911txts thing is intermittently fascinating but seems a bit like rubbernecking at the site of a terrible accident."

That the pager messages should spur a heated discussion about online privacy concerns is hardly surprising, given increasing attention to online privacy issues over the past several years. The ability of corporations and government agencies to collect data on private citizens has led to international concern about whether an individual's "right to privacy" has been significantly eroded in the information age (Jorgenson 2010). Citizen-sponsored privacy initiatives (including those employing cryptographic techniques to resist surveillance), have attempted to reclaim the online space for private activity, but in the period since 9/11 governments have used arguments about the need to fight potential terrorist threat to further encroach on online privacy (Chadwick 2006).

While it might seem that those who rejected an affective response to the 9/11 pager leak were rejecting the dominant media narrative of 9/11 in favour of a new focus on privacy, the fact is that the "public drama" coverage of 9/11 had long been subject to such a challenge, particularly when such coverage involved the releases of personal communications. In the case of the 9/11 phone calls, there was considerable public ambivalence about the aggressiveness with which the *New York Times* pursued the release of the information (Weiss 2006); after the calls were made public, an editorial in *The Wall Street Journal* criticised broadcast media for their coverage of the emotional exchanges, describing the decision to replay these calls a form of "prime-time pornography" (Nacos 2007).

Those who used the hashtag to argue, as one observer commented, that reading the pager messages was "breaching everyone's privacy", thus echoed previous critiques of 9/11 media coverage. But privacy advocates sometimes instead framed their comments in terms of a larger conversation about online privacy invasion. For example, observers drew analogies between the pager leak and an incident in 2006, when America Online made public their user database. Though the database had been superficially 'anonymised' by AOL, the company failed to realise it was easily to discover information about specific users. One reader of the pager messages noted that "The 9/11 pager intercepts are like the AOL search data dump: a major privacy violation but hard to stop reading." Another responded that the leaks were "also similar (to the AOL dump) in that it's a slow motion disaster: A web search 2 years out could turn up evidence of a spouse's affair, etc."

Still others who felt that the pager message publication was a privacy violation specifically condemned WikiLeaks' history of publishing private information. As an organisation whose practice of "involuntary transparency" (Lord 2007) regularly involves the publication of material deliberately hidden from public view, WikiLeaks had long prompted debate over when and if such exposures were merited. This debate became most heated when releases included private correspondence, such as the leaked personal emails of Sarah Palin in September 2008 and the emails of Holocaust denier David Irving in November 2009. Several

commenters in the #911txts stream saw WikiLeaks' actions in releasing the pager messages as a similar, or more egregious, case of crossing the line. One observer noted, "the WikiLeaks guys are criminals. Doesn't anyone see this is a crime?"

Observers who tried to draw attention to the specific privacy issues in the WikiLeaks pager leak – noting, for example, that the page logs contained phone numbers, occasional names, and pager CAP codes – were themselves subject to condemnation by those who felt that the messages should not be looked at all. In place of any specific objections, those who refused to read the messages often gestured instead towards the larger issues behind the leak: "What about the private life in the USA?" "Where's the outrage over these 9/11 texts? How can anyone not be concerned that this data even exists?"

Such comments reflected the fact that, at least in the US, there was indeed public concern about the privacy implications of leaking the messages,<sup>11</sup> not least because the nature of the leak made WikiLeaks unusually vulnerable to charges of privacy invasion. Perhaps proactively, WikiLeaks asserted that the release of the messages was actually intended to draw attention to privacy vulnerabilities: spokesman Daniel Schmitt claimed the pager data was sent to the group by an anonymous source wishing to raise awareness around issues of privacy and data retention.<sup>12</sup> However, the argument that violating the privacy of those who sent pager messages on 9/11 was aiding the cause of data privacy held little weight with those who found fault with the release. In the days following the leak, WikiLeaks acknowledged that privacy concerns had tainted the conversation about the leaks, remarking defensively on their Twitter feed that "journalists covering 911 pager privacy [should not] shoot the messenger; deal with the big issue."

### **"An interesting archive": the pager messages as historical record**

WikiLeaks may not have legitimised their actions in the eyes of privacy advocates by claiming the messages drew attention to privacy violations, but they were more successful in a second strategy of legitimisation: their framing of the messages as historical documents and of the leak as the release of a historical archive. On the landing page of 911.WikiLeaks.org, WikiLeaks described the pager messages as "a significant and completely objective record of the defining moment of our time", adding that they hoped "its entry into the historical record will lead to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how this tragedy and its aftermath may have been prevented."<sup>13</sup> News articles about the pager messages quoted this claim throughout the day, reinforcing WikiLeaks' suggestion that the messages were primary source material for historians to mine for information.

Describing the messages as an online historical archive, WikiLeaks drew an implicit comparison between the pager messages and other attempts by scholars and curators to create online archives. The push to make historical materials accessible online dates back from the mid-1990s, with the past five years seeing a dramatic increase in efforts to scan primary source material, to archive born-digital material, and to generate "memory repositories" that record stories and collect ephemera connected to specific events.<sup>14</sup> In fact, a major online archive of materials connected to 9/11 is already in place: the September 11 Digital Archive. This collection, comprised of voluntary submissions ranging from government emails to scanned flyers to personal narratives, was created in the months following 9/11 as a partnership between scholarly organisations, granting agencies, and the Smithsonian, and is still in active use by scholars. In early 2011, the Library of Congress allocated funds to permanently house the archive on the Library's servers.

The URL chosen by WikiLeaks for the pager message archive – 911.WikiLeaks.org – closely resembles that of the September 11 digital archive, which is located at 911.digitalarchive.org. It is hard to tell if this was a deliberate attempt to borrow legitimacy from the larger, established archive, but the group's claim that the pager messages had scholarly value was clearly wielded strategically. The 'historical' value of the material shifted the focus from leaking to archiving, and served as an additional defence against those who condemned WikiLeaks for violating the privacy of the authors of the pager messages. Framing the material as history also rendered it less political – suggesting that rather than serving as an intervention into present-day debates, the archive was a means for historians and the interested public to gain a "nuanced understanding" of events that had already transpired.

Reflecting WikiLeaks' own framing and that of media reports, this understanding that the pager messages should be seen as 'historical' appears repeatedly in the #911txts twitter archive. The claim that the messages were worthy of scrutiny as historical documents was used to challenge those who called for a boycott of the messages on privacy grounds: shortly after a commenter urged others on Twitter to "show some respect" and ignore the messages, a reader of the messages countered that "WL posting the #911 txts has nothing to do with not paying respect to those dead. It is important historical data and we should be thankful." Another commenter, echoing WikiLeaks' own language, described the messages as an "amazing objective record of the 9/11 attacks through 24 hours of pager messages." Other commenters urged "anyone interested in history to have a look", and noted that the messages were "an interesting archive for historians."

Other Twitter messages within the #911txts hashtag did not specifically call the messages 'historical', but rather presented them as forms of evidence, re-tweeting moments in which the messages documented various events on 9/11, such as the collapse of the North and South Tower, the error messages sent out by financial servers, the first use of the word 'terrorist', and the effort to ascertain the safety of the daughters of President Bush, whose code names were apparently *Twinkle* and *Turq*. These messages did not have the shock value of the emotionally-laden responses to personal communications from the stream, but rather functioned as a way to re-enact the day from an event-oriented standpoint, creating a timeline of the events surrounding the fall of the Twin Towers. That none of this information was novel did not seem to change what readers perceived as the historical value of the messages: as one tweet noted, "are we going to discover anything interesting? Still a great record of a key moment in recent history anyway."

### **Visualising tragedy: the pager messages as data**

If those who discussed the pager messages as 'historical' information managed to sidestep the charge that reading the

messages was a form of voyeurism, another group within the #911txts hashtag stream pushed the detachment even further, taking the messages as a data set to be archived, indexed, searched and visualised. Their efforts to map the WikiLeaks data can be seen in light of an increasing trend towards data visualisation as a means of "making sense" of large data sets in the public realm.<sup>12</sup> Using ready-made engines or creating their own ways of revealing patterns in the database, experts and amateurs generated visualisations and indexes of the leaked messages beginning on mid-day on November 25 and throughout the following week. Their efforts included graphs of pager numbers and email addresses (<http://onarmedman.com/research/mining911pages>), tag clouds, searchable SQL databases (<http://keyboardcowboy.ca/911search/>), scripts for database import, animations, charts and timelines (<http://www.vizworld.com/2009/11/911-pager-data-visualization/>).

While the #911txt hashtag was still active, these visualisations were distributed on Twitter by their authors and fans. Programmers also shared technical speculations on the hashtag, such as "wondering how hard it would be to programmatically find all two - factor auth pages" or "instead of quoting single messages, you could do a quantitative corpus linguistic analysis." As this last comment suggests, the data frame was also embraced by those who wished to anonymise the messages out of privacy concerns. Another commenter called for a search interface that would allow the curious yet privacy-conscious access to the messages: "Is anyone working on an anonymised version of the #911txts so that respectful people can read through without feeling so invasive?"

Though the tweets that embraced the data frame for interpreting the pager message release reflected, on the surface, a purely technical approach to the messages, the data projects which resulted from those working inside the data frame had quite different functions and emotional effect. While some visualisations focused on relatively neutral aspects of the data such as message frequency, others, such as Jeff Clark's animated "phase burst" visualisation of the 100 most common words used in messages (<http://neoformix.com/2009/Sep11PagerData.html>), had a far more poignant quality. And while searchable databases worked well for those who saw that data in terms of its historical value, they were also tools used by those searching the messages for evidence of government conspiracy.

### **"Looking for shenanigans": the pager messages through a conspiracy frame**

Conspiracy narratives about 9/11 – usually involving the complicity of the Bush Administration in the attacks on the Twin Towers and Washington – have continued to play a significant role in the ongoing attempts to "make sense" of 9/11 in the US and elsewhere. For the past decade, what has come to be known as the 9/11 'Truth' movement has persisted both in the US and internationally despite widespread official condemnation and public scorn. Indeed, scholars have argued that the strength of the truth movement reflects a general shift back into a conspiracy mentality in the US, after the ebb of conspiracy thinking at the end of the Cold War (Pratt 2003).

The numbers suggest that 9/11 conspiracy belief is much stronger than media narratives might acknowledge: in the US a 2004 Zogby poll found that half of New York City residents believe that US leaders "knew in advance that attacks were planned before or on September 11, 2001, and they consciously failed to act;" and a 2006 Scripps-Howard Poll revealed that more than one third of Americans believe that is either likely or very likely that the US government either assisted in the September 11 attacks or deliberately wanted them to happen because it wanted to go to war in the Middle East (Knight 2008).

Given the tenacity of the 9/11truth movement, it was inevitable that the WikiLeaks pager leak would be seen as a possible challenge to the official narrative of 9/11. Beyond being ideal fodder for the 9/11 truth movement, the reading of the pager leak as proof of a government cover-up was also predetermined by the messages' distribution via WikiLeaks. The organisation's customary practice – both before and after the 9/11 pager leak – has been to release material intended to have an impact on an ongoing political or financial cover up; for example, documents providing evidence of extrajudicial assassination in Kenya or financial improprieties at banks such as Kaupthing or Julius Baer. Despite WikiLeaks' own emphasis on the historical status of the pager leak, a sizable number of those who followed the release assumed that WikiLeaks intended that the pager messages be treated in the same way as the rest of the WikiLeaks archive – namely, as evidence of some sort of wrongdoing. As one observer commented in the #911txts hashtag stream, "the whole point [of the leak] is to look for possible shenanigans."

If the emergence of the conspiracy frame was predictable, however the way that conspiracy emerged as a topic in the #911txts hashtag was less so. Instead of any actual discussion of conspiracy in the hashtag stream, observers posted bemused speculations about what conspiracy theorists might make of the evidence. Before WikiLeaks had begun releasing the pager messages, one commenter speculated as to whether conspiracy theorists would be "quieted or made louder" by the leak, prompting another to respond that "some will spout off, of that I'm sure." Soon after the messages began appearing on 911.WikiLeaks.org, an observer commented that the pager messages were "lots of fun reading ... conspiracy theories commence", while others remarked that the messages were "fascinating for conspiracy theorists" and revealed "how rumours and conspiracy theorists started." Some commenters expressed hostility towards the mere idea that the pager messages might be used as evidence of conspiracy, making statements such as: "911txts (are) pretty interesting stuff...conspiracy theorists can go choke on this, though," "I would like all the conspiracy theorists to STFU," and "All the morons looking for conspiracies in the #911txts need to get a freaking life. You guys SUCK."

Marginalised by such comments, anyone in the #911txts stream interested in promoting the notion of conspiracy did so indirectly, re-tweeting cryptic or suggestive pager messages. These included several messages that claimed that bombs went off in the Twin Towers and at the Pentagon, and one message (eventually the most re-tweeted of all the leaked pager messages) that cryptically declared "STOP! CONNIE RICE PULLED THE PLUG! CIA ADVICED (sic)." There was also one instance of a fake pager message that was not in the original database but was falsely re-tweeted in the hashtag stream in order to suggest that Jews were behind 9/11: "ALL JEWS EVAC MANHATTAN PLAN ZION COMMENCES IN FIVE HOURS." Real or fake, the pager messages were placed in the hashtag stream without comments as to how they might challenge dominant narratives

of 9/11, leaving them open to interpretations outside the frame of conspiracy.

The absence of explicit conspiracy talk within the #911txts hashtag thread did not go unnoticed by those who were following the tag. Concerned that the hashtag had not become popular enough yet to 'trend' on Twitter, an observer in the thread asked satirically, "where are all the conspiracy theorists?" In fact, those who had an interest in discussing the conspiracy implications of the pager messages had already gravitated towards online forums including *Reddit*, *The Huffington Post*, and the conspiracy sites *AboveTopSecret* and *Prison Planet*. At the social-news site *Reddit*<sup>15</sup> and the *Huffington Post*, conspiracy theorists sparred with conspiracy debunkers over the possible meaning of the messages. Each site received more than 1,000 responses in their respective discussion threads, meaning that the conversation on these forums was as lively as the conversation on Twitter. On the websites however, even though conspiracy interpretations sparked debate, conspiracy theorists were not ostracised. According to the comments made at *The Huffington Post*, the very existence of a discussion thread on 9/11 conspiracy was a significant departure from the *Post's* policy of deleting comments left by "truthers". Truthers expressed their gratitude to *The Huffington Post* for allowing them to have the conversation about the pager leak on that site, and also speculated that the pager messages themselves could bring about broader acceptance for the 9/11 truth movement.<sup>16</sup>

On *AboveTopSecret* and *Prison Planet* conversations evolved somewhat differently, as those who participated in discussion threads were less focused on debating *whether* the messages might demonstrate conspiracy than on *how* they might do so. In remarks resembling those on the #911txts hashtag, a few posters on these forums expressed ambivalence about the messages, responding to them affectively or expressing privacy concerns. For the most part, however, the emphasis in the conspiracy forums was on finding clues in the messages. At *AboveTopSecret*, discussion moved between connecting acronyms in various pager messages to the role of the US military in the attacks, and debating the accuracy of messages referring to 'explosions' at the World Trade Center and near the Pentagon. For some, these messages affirmed suspicions that bombs were used to bring down the Twin Towers: for others, the misinformation simply reflected the chaos of events.

In the discussion thread on the *Prison Planet* forum, conspiracy thinking about 9/11 competed with conspiracy thinking about global warming. In the midst of speculations as to the meaning of individual pager messages, an argument arose as to whether the 9/11 pager messages were a decoy intended to distract attention away from the emails of climate scientists leaked by WikiLeaks days before. The 'Climategate' emails had been the subject of extended discussion on *Prison Planet*, as some on the site saw them as proof that global warming was itself a conspiracy. As posters debated which conspiracy should take priority among the 'researchers' who participated in the forum, political affiliations threatened to overtake the discussion of conspiracy. One poster described those interested in the climate scientist emails as 'neocons' who wanted to shut down discussion of 9/11 for political reasons, asking: "is it possible to not clutter this thread with continued Neo-Con talking points by desperate PNAC members yelling 'NOOOOOOOO DO NOT LOOK AT THE PAGES!!!!!! NOOOOOOOOOO DO NOT EXPOSE THE HUNDREDS OF TIMESTAMPED PIECES OF EVIDENCE PROVING BOMBS IN THE BUILDINGS!'"<sup>17</sup><sup>18</sup> Another member of the forum attempted to reconcile the two sides, arguing that "both leaks are significant" and that 'patriots' needed to "walk and chew gum at the same time (i.e., decipher both sets of data at once). Patriotism, in this framework, referred to the ability to point to understanding structures of power that extended beyond politics.

As the above exchange suggests, conspiracy emerged as the most complex of the interpretive frames used to ascribe meaning to the 9/11 pager texts. Conspiracy theorists were the most attentive to the actual contents of the pager messages: they saw them as important because they might reveal something new about 9/11 that would change the fundamental meaning of the event itself, and thus challenge how 9/11 has been used in the intervening years as a justification for US activity around the world. For truthers, unravelling the mystery behind 9/11 meant mapping out the interconnections between powerful individuals and institutions whose cleverly hidden machinations had left faint trails only they had the tenacity to follow.

In his essay "Good Manners In the Age of WikiLeaks," Slavoj Zizek suggests that there is a struggle within WikiLeaks between a conspiratorial understanding of the world and a 'liberal' understanding in which WikiLeaks is reduced to "a radical case of 'investigative journalism'" (Zizek 2010). The pager leak exemplifies this tension: even as WikiLeaks itself promoted a frame for the messages that resisted the conspiracy narrative, conspiracy theorists' attempts to "look for shenanigans" in the material acted in the fashion in which WikiLeaks themselves had encouraged in the past. Assange's frustration with the appropriation of the pager messages by conspiracy theorists is reflected in an interview with the *Belfast Telegraph* the following summer. Dismissing the claims of the truth movement, Assange remarked that he was "constantly annoyed that people are distracted by false conspiracies such as 9/11, when all around we provide evidence of real conspiracies" (Bell 2010).

In the end, however, conspiracy theorists were not long distracted by the pager messages. Online conversation about the messages dwindled within a few days. Stragglers who had missed the messages over the Thanksgiving holidays continued to discover them over the course of the following week, and a few forum posters continued to debate their significance, but little emerged from the efforts of those who tried to decode them for any deeper meaning. The leak faded from public view until the following summer, when researchers used the messages to plot an "emotional timeline" of September 11, showing what range of emotions were present in the pager. The report, popularised in *Psychology Today*,<sup>19</sup> momentarily reawakened interest in the messages, but also reinforced the media narrative of 9/11 as an emotional experience. In the end, the affective narrative of the pager messages as a facet of the "public drama" of 9/11 lingered longest in public memory.

### **Conclusion: framing WikiLeaks**

About a month after the release of the 9/11 messages, WikiLeaks suspended its online operations. Though publicly they maintained this was in order to concentrate on fundraising, the move offline was also connected to the processing of a data leak that required the full attention of core members of the operation. Assange and others headed to Iceland, where they began work on the de-encryption of a US military video depicting an aerial attack on supposedly unarmed civilians walking

down a street in Baghdad. In April, when the organisation released the video, they fundamentally changed their way of working with the media and with leaked material. Advance publicity for the leak – and a well attended press conference – produced a wave of international attention that overshadowed coverage of earlier releases. Like the pager messages, the video was released on a separate WikiLeaks website: this time, however, the website had a far different feel. Instead of discussing the video as a “completely objective account” to be entered into the “historical record”, WikiLeaks chose to frame the leak as a political act, titling the website “Collateral Murder”, editing a version of the footage, and providing contextual information that steered observers towards a predetermined reading of events.

This shift to an activist framework startled WikiLeaks followers familiar with the organisation’s usual manner of presenting source material in a comparatively neutral manner. In an interview on *The Colbert Report*, Assange defended his choices, arguing that as long as the “full source material” was available for the public to judge independently, the choice of editorialised framing was permissible. But the “Collateral Murder” clip was highly polarising: from that moment onwards, WikiLeaks would be seen as a politically motivated organisation with an interest in challenging US policy – in particular, as Assange himself has asserted, with “stopping two wars” that the US is currently waging in the Middle East. In consequence, WikiLeaks has been the subject of US legal inquiry, their funds have been blocked by US financial companies, and their website has been declared off limits for US military and diplomatic personnel.

WikiLeaks’ release of 9/11 pager messages can be seen as an end and a beginning. The leak marked the end of the early days of WikiLeaks – a time when the organisation’s activities briefly and occasionally became the focus of public attention, but when the organisation itself remained largely unexamined in terms of its structure, its intention, and its operating practices. It also marked the end of WikiLeaks as an organisation whose politics could be of less interest to its followers than the material it chose to release. At the same time, the pager leak was the beginning of a new WikiLeaks, an organisation that used media savvy and theatrics to gain the broadest possible attention for its source material. In this regard, the new WikiLeaks has been highly successful: the leaks after “Collateral Murder” have been the focus of global attention, and have spurred conversations around the globe about the way in which the United States has conducted itself in what may be the twilight of its days as the self-appointed chief puppeteer of the world’s political and economic theatre.

At the same time, it remains to be seen whether these global conversations will ultimately result in political or social change. Just as pre-existing interpretive frames managed to hijack and distort the conversation about the 9/11 pager leak, the interpretive frames that have guided international understanding of US politics have shaped conversations about recent WikiLeaks releases. Most troublingly, the US military video, the Iraq and Afghan SIGACTS, the diplomatic cables, and especially the Guantanamo dossiers, are often discussed in terms of what WikiLeaks as an organisation has come to stand for. If the “old” WikiLeaks found itself challenged by the polysemic responses to the material it released to the world, the “new” WikiLeaks faces exponentially more challenges, as the organisation wages information warfare across different cultures, different continents, and against different structures of power and governance.

#### Footnotes

1. The website is now offline; the leaked material can still be found in various torrent streams, including [http://thepiratebay.org/torrent/5452454/9\\_11\\_tragedy\\_pager\\_intercepts - WikiLeaks %5BTxt - Csv - ENG%5D](http://thepiratebay.org/torrent/5452454/9_11_tragedy_pager_intercepts_-_WikiLeaks_%5BTxt_-_Csv_-_ENG%5D)
2. Twapperkeeper, a hashtag archiving service, was used to collect approximately 1500 tweets on November 24-25. The archive is located online at <http://twapperkeeper.com/hashtag/911txts>. Unless specifically noted, all Twitter messages cited in this article can be found in this online archive. For the purpose of this article, the messages from this archive will be anonymized, meaning identifying information from the messages (user; date) will not be used in the text.
3. For an extensive discussion of journalists’ relationship with WikiLeaks before the release of the Collateral Murder video, see Lynch, “We’re Going To Crack The World Open.”
4. Several media outlets – *The New York Times* being the most vocal among them – have disputed the idea that they had ‘partnered’ with WikiLeaks, characterizing their relationship with WikiLeaks as being the same as a relationship with any information source (Hendler 2010).
5. For example, WikiLeaks expressed exasperation with media coverage of Climategate, noting that the organisation was often overlooked as the original source. On November 23, the organisation tweeted “Yes, we were the first to reveal the climate research emails: know the source.”
6. A number of Sarah Palin fans began to follow WikiLeaks after her personal emails were leaked to the site, and white supremacists began following WikiLeaks after the site leaked a mailing list for the British National Party.
7. All messages from WikiLeaks can be found at <http://twitter.com/#!/WikiLeaks>
8. After a British court granted a ‘superinjunction’ barring *The Guardian* from reporting that they had been banned from mentioning an investigation into the illegal dumping practices of Trafigura, the comedian Stephen Fry, *The Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger, and WikiLeaks urged their Twitter followers to discuss Trafigura online. Within hours, the superinjunction was withdrawn.
9. Several days after the 9/11 leak, WikiLeaks tweeted that 911.WikiLeaks.org had “inspired a new political history method: ‘offset real-time.’” detainee interrogation log: <http://detainee063.com>
10. In the wake of the pager leak, a US Congressman called for an investigation of WikiLeaks’ activities (that investigation never moved forward, though US criminal investigation of WikiLeaks is now underway for subsequent releases by the site).



11. The CNN video is archived as an addenda to the CNN article by Meserve and Mallory listed below: see <http://www.cnn.com/2009/US/11/25/september.11.messages/index.html?iref=allsearch>.
12. WikiLeaks spokesperson Daniel Domscheit-Berg (aka Daniel Schmitt) made this point on several occasions, including in an interview with Jennifer 8 Lee for a Dec. 1 blog post in *The New York Times*.
13. Portions of the 911.WikiLeaks.org website (now offline) can be accessed at <http://mirror.WikiLeaks.info/files/index.html>
14. For a discussion of the rise of online archives and the "digital humanities" movement, see Svenson 2010. A discussion of the idea of the online "memory repository" can be found in Jesiek and Hunsinger, 2010.
15. The 9/11 pager messages were the first WikiLeaks "data dump" to be visualized in this manner: over the summer of 2010, the release of SIGACTS connected to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan spurred another series of data visualizations, including several from the Guardian and other WikiLeaks media partners.
16. The discussion is archived at [http://www.reddit.com/r/reddit.com/comments/a7xpt/conspiracy\\_theories\\_commence\\_WikiLeaks\\_to\\_release/](http://www.reddit.com/r/reddit.com/comments/a7xpt/conspiracy_theories_commence_WikiLeaks_to_release/).
17. The discussion is archived at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/11/25/911-text-messages-release\\_n\\_370085.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/11/25/911-text-messages-release_n_370085.html)
18. The discussion is archived at <http://forum.prisonplanet.com/index.php?action=printpage;topic=145873.0>
19. The discussion is archived at <http://www.abovetopsecret.com/forum/thread521939/pg1>
20. 'PNAC' here refers to the Project For The New American Century, a conservative think tank (1997-2006) that has long been of interest to conspiracy theorists.
21. WikiLeaks' Emotional Diary of September 11th: "Evolved Primate" Blog, *Psychology Today*, August 31, 2010. <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evolved-primate/201008/WikiLeaks-emotional-diary-september-11th>

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