

❖ **Rejoinder - GMJ-AU Vol 5 Issue 1 - WikiLeaks and celebrating the power of the mainstream media: a response to Christian Fuchs**

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In the latest edition of the Global Media Journal: Australian Edition Christian Fuchs (2011) - in an article on the political economy of WikiLeaks - I was accused by Christian Fuchs (2011) of 'celebrating' the power of the mainstream media.. Considering the ideological and intellectual implications of actually 'celebrating' the mainstream media, this is no small accusation. For someone who has spent the last 15 years analysing and critiquing mainstream media power in relation to topics as varied as the US occupation of Iraq, the xenophobic representation of Islam in the US and UK press, multiculturalism in the Swedish media, the lopsided US news coverage of the Turkish suppression of the Kurds, the political-economic subjugation of Turkish journalists, and even Bruce Springsteen's venture into hyper-commodification, such an accusation is jarring.

Fuchs' piece on WikiLeaks was thorough in terms of his use of theory and empirical data, yet the misrepresentation of my argument about the relationship between WikiLeaks and the mainstream media, and, in turn, his dismissal of this important topic as relevant to a thorough political-economic analysis of WikiLeaks, warrants response and discussion.

To begin, let me address head-on the confusing and unwarranted accusation that I 'celebrate' the power of the mainstream media (See my 2010 article for the online version of the French monthly newspaper, *Le Monde Diplomatique* at <http://mondediplo.com/blogs/three-digital-myths>)

In his article for the Australian edition of Global Media Journal, Fuchs (2011:11) wrote:

Christian Christensen (2010) makes three observations about WikiLeaks:

Wikileaks' editorial control gives it a certain power that distinguishes it from other social media.

National laws and contexts are important for protecting whistleblowing.

The circumstance that the Afghan Diaries became so well-known was due to the circumstance that WikiLeaks released them first to *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* and *Der Spiegel*, which would show that the death of journalism-hypothesis is wrong, "that mainstream journalism still holds a good deal of power", that these three mainstream media were "professionally, organisationally and economically prepared for the job of decoding and distributing the material provided" and that "Wikileaks has reminded us that structure, boundaries, laws and reputation still matter" (Christensen 2010).

While I fully agree with the first two observations, I am critical of Christian Christensen's third point because it sounds too much like a celebration of the power of mainstream media.

In Fuchs subsequent analysis of this last of my three points, and in reference to well-known factors such as advertiser pressure and inherent biases of major media corporations, Fuchs goes on to write that, "the power of the mainstream media is not to be celebrated, but rather should make us worry" (2011:11).

With this admonishment in mind, the first point worth noting is that Fuchs cites only a few, very limited portions of my sentences and paragraphs. Let me now provide the full versions of the two paragraphs (in Christensen, 2010) that were the sources for the suggestion that I celebrate mainstream media power (with the short portions used by Fuchs in bold italics):

Wikileaks decided to release the Afghan documents to *The Guardian*, the *New York Times* and *Der Spiegel* weeks before they were released online — mainstream media outlets, not 'alternative' (presumably sympathetic) publications such as *The Nation*, *Z Magazine* or *IndyMedia*. The reason is surely that these three news outlets are top international news agenda-setters. Few outlets (leaving aside broadcasters such as the BBC or CNN) have so much clout as the *New York Times* and *The Guardian* — and being published in English helps exposure. The WikiLeaks people were savvy enough to realise that any release of the documents online without prior contact with select news outlets would lead to a chaotic rush of unfocused articles the world over. The release of the Afghan Diaries shows that **mainstream journalism still holds a good deal of power**, but the

nature of that power has shifted (compared to 20 or 30 years ago).

And:

At the heart of the death of journalism myth (and that of the role of social media) is the presumption of a causal relationship between access to information and democratic change. The idea that mere access to raw information *de facto* leads to change (radical or otherwise) is as romantic as the notion that mere access to technology can do the same. Information, just as technology, is only useful if the knowledge and skills required to activate such information are present. WikiLeaks chose its three newspapers not because they necessarily represented ideological kindred spirits for Julian Assange and his colleagues, but because they were **professionally, organisationally and economically prepared for the job of decoding and distributing the material provided**. In a digital world that is constantly being redefined as non-hierarchical, borderless and fluid, **WikiLeaks has reminded us that structure, boundaries, laws and reputation still matter**.

As these expanded citations indicate, my discussion and analysis of the relationship between WikiLeaks and their mainstream partners was far more nuanced than Fuchs suggests. It is a shame that they were not included in their fuller form. It is worth remembering that Assange himself took a very pragmatic (some might say neo-liberal) position vis-à-vis the release of leaked material to journalists.

Back in 2009, and in justifying the practice of employing an 'embargo' period in advance of a broader release (thus giving media outlets time to process the information and write stories), Assange stated that:

You'd think the bigger and more important the document is, the more likely it will be reported on but that's absolutely not true. It's about supply and demand. Zero supply equals high demand, it has value. As soon as we release the material, the supply goes to infinity, so the perceived value goes to zero. 1

What is clear is that Fuchs has confused the simple statement that mainstream media still have a great deal of power for a celebration of that power. It is hardly taking a radical, neo-liberal position to suggest that *The New York Times*, *Der Spiegel* and *The Guardian* are powerful, well-organized, and relatively well-respected agenda setters in the international news arena. Do I think they are powerful? Yes. Well-organized? Yes. Generally well-respected? Yes. Agenda-setters? Yes. Do I feel personally and professionally that commercial media maintain a truly critical eye over the powerful, and that the power and respect they themselves have garnered is warranted? No, but that makes no difference.

What I wrote is, as far as I can see, a fairly obvious statement of fact. How that is interpreted as a celebration of mainstream media power, on the other hand, is something I simply do not understand. To celebrate mainstream media power is to revel in it. To promote it. To enjoy it. I did (and do) none of these things.

From a critical perspective, WikiLeaks' collaboration with major media outlets raises an obvious question: if the three newspapers were *not*, "professionally, organizationally and economically prepared for the job of decoding and distributing the material provided" (as I put it), then why did WikiLeaks decide to work with them in the first place? In a follow-up article (also for *Le Monde Diplomatique* at <http://mondediplo.com/blogs/wikileaks-losing-suburbia>), I wrote the following in which I illustrate an attitude toward mainstream media that is far from celebratory:

...while WikiLeaks material is tailor-made for the critical eye of the alternative press, the political economy of most capitalist media systems means that these alternative outlets, and their contents, are *de facto* marginalized. While a deal with mainstream newspapers could be seen as a Faustian bargain for WikiLeaks, it was a deal that Assange was willing to make, probably because it would enable access to a sizeable chunk of citizens not part of the core of WikiLeaks' lovers (who follow the organization no matter what) or haters (who detest WikiLeaks no matter what).

Clearly, the information gained via the WikiLeaks releases has proved to be transformative. As I also wrote in my second piece, in the weeks following the release of the Afghanistan and Iraq dossiers via the mainstream press, there seemed to be interesting new possibilities on the horizon:

It appeared, during this short time, that WikiLeaks may have done something that I had thought near impossible: inserting a radical critique of US military and geo-political power into mainstream popular discourse (particularly in the US). Granted, *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* are not the newspapers of choice for many in the US and UK. Far from it. Yet the very presence of the material on their front pages opened up the possibility that the murky world of US power might now be forced to concede ground to transparency advocates (Christensen, 2011).

While I attempt in these two short, popular pieces to add some nuance to the WikiLeaks story by discussing the possible implications (positive and negative) of their collaboration with mainstream media outlets, such a discussion is missing from Fuchs' own analysis.

This brings me to a final, broader point regarding WikiLeaks. Their utterly pragmatic utilization of major corporate outlets was a *de facto* admission (again, as I wrote in my initial piece) that, "structure [...] and reputation still matter." At the risk of beating a dead horse, to say that something 'matters' is not the same as celebrating it: I can write that US military power still matters globally, but that does not mean that I endorse or celebrate that power. WikiLeaks undercut a great deal of the mythology surrounding social media, the decline of the nation-state and the death of traditional journalism through their structure, operations and collaboration with mainstream media. Just because it might inconveniently conflict with a definition of the organization as purely radical or alternative, one cannot simply wish away the fact that WikiLeaks collaborated – willingly and fruitfully, one could add – with commercial outlets.

It is clear that WikiLeaks have performed a crucial democratic function via their revelations, and it is also clear that this

function was made possible – with the release of the Afghanistan and Iraq war documents – via a calculated collaboration with mainstream media. As I was pointing out in my short articles, through this collaboration WikiLeaks sent a clear message to the broader public: whether we like it or not, large news outlets are still important in contemporary society.

It is equally important to note that this collaboration was done with the clear side-effects of boosting the sales figures, advertising revenues and socio-cultural capital of these already powerful, Western media organizations. Thus, the irony of the accusation leveled against me in Fuchs' analysis is this: if any individual or group is responsible for celebrating, re-enforcing and augmenting the power of the established mainstream media, it is WikiLeaks.

References

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