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Editorial

WIKILEAKS: Journalism and the 21st Century Mediascape

This issue of Global Media Journal, Australian edition, has taken a significant step in choosing to focus its attention on the WikiLeaks phenomena. The call for papers for the issue elicited a strong response. We were aware that WikiLeaks has provoked significant controversy in its relatively short existence. The refereed papers, essays, book reviews and presentation by Kristinn Hrafnsson – the spokesperson of WikiLeaks – all reflect the robust debates currently circulating around the WikiLeaks phenomenon. In some respects, the emergence of WikiLeaks was tailor-made for public media exposure and analysis. Despite an early lack of interest by the mainstream media, Wikileaks persisted until it won due recognition with its web-based whistleblowing model and significant assault on classified files – most from the alleged whistleblower, Bradley Manning, the US army private accused of leaking classified documents to WikiLeaks.

Our interest in WikiLeaks stems from the impact it has generally had on the contemporary mediascape, and in particular on the practice of investigative journalism. It may be a fitting engagement for our Australian-based journal for as Lisa Lynch has written, the Australian context was one of the earlier sites for a WikiLeaks revelation:

On March 19, 2009, Australian citizens learned that their government was considering a mandatory national filtering system that would prevent them from accessing websites ostensibly identified as having connections to child pornography. This revelation, which engendered substantial political fallout, was remarkable to some observers because of the way the story emerged. The plan was made public neither through a leak to a print journalist nor through a whistleblower's televised press conference, but instead via a copy of the filter list posted anonymously on Wikileaks, a Swedish-hosted website run by an international collective dedicated to untraceable document-leaking.¹

While Assange has likened himself – in his role as WikiLeaks founder and chief spokesperson – to a journalist and publisher, questions persist as to the lines he draws between source, reporter and publisher. This is a line increasingly blurred by the Internet-led methodology deployed by WikiLeaks.

Our interest in WikiLeaks was emphatically brought into focus by the emotive and devastating images of the so-called "Collateral Murder" video, provided by a whistleblower/Pentagon insider and uploaded and then redistributed virally via YouTube. Our immediate sense of the video material was not shock, but recognition.

David Finkle's remarkable book, *The Good Soldiers*, treated this episode in 2009. In a passage over about nine pages, Finkle reproduced the banter and invective on the sound track of the video as the Apache helicopter's crew moved on their targets/victims. *The Good Soldiers* was published well in advance of the release of the "Collateral Murder" video and herein lies one of the extraordinary aspects of WikiLeaks: its capacity to transform revelations and exposures of secrets to a global audience numbering in the millions. Compared to book circulation, this is attention-getting on a massive scale.

Our second encounter with WikiLeaks was with its next major operation – the release of the Afghan War Logs in the context of their publication by *The Guardian* in August 2010. The expanded edition of *The Guardian* released on that day with its pages of analysis of the logs, was an extraordinary publishing moment for the mainstream media – with participation by *The New York Times* and *Der Spiegel*. These deals between the mainstream media and WikiLeaks – generally thought of as the most politically liberal and progressive news organisations – have both expanded and contracted in the latter stages of the engagements by WikiLeaks – one punctuated by a controversial release recently of yet another round of embassy cables.

This new release moved a number of our authors for this issue to revise their contributions –awakening yet another series of questions about the management (or mis-management) of information of this kind. *The Guardian* was critical of WikiLeaks for releasing the un-redacted cables and Julian Assange has countered with a stinging criticism of the role played by the mainstream media in this latest episode.

In the context of the agenda of issues raised by the emergence of WikiLeaks, it is the case that significant public debate has increased in frequency in the last months. One such debate was held in City Recital Hall Angel Place in Sydney as part of IQ² Australia debates. The “resolution of the house” was that “WikiLeaks is a force for good”. This concern for assessing ethical behaviour in the public interest is a frequent theme associated with WikiLeaks and in particular, Assange often defends WikiLeaks with a moral justification (the public interest) for the leaking of secrets.

Those opposed take an equally strong moral position on the damage to governmental operability caused by leaks. While we could try to call on Kantian philosophical categories to assist in settling the moral dimensions to this debate, it is the case that our interest at Global Media Journal Australia is not to resolve these moral questions. It is rather to interrogate the ‘force’ itself – to find how WikiLeaks not only changed the rules of journalistic practices, but also changed the way we think about the ‘rules.’ They created a step-change or second-order change to the world of investigative journalism and in this sense are a ‘force’ to be reckoned with.

Finally, there are many people to thank for this issue. Our colleagues at the Media and Communication Department, The University of Sydney, very kindly provided the copy of Kristin Hrafnsson’s address – with introduction by Peter Fray, Publisher and Editor in Chief of the Sydney Morning Herald – at the Seymour Centre, Sydney, June 17. Thanks to Professor Gerard Goggin, Dr. Penny O’Donnell, and Dr. Stephen Maras for their assistance in providing this material. We would like to thank our authors, essayists, book reviewers and referees for this issue – indispensable in maintaining our standards of scholarship.

Our entire editorial team here at Global Media Journal, Australian Edition contributed tirelessly to the production of this issue, thanks to all of them. We would also like to thank the following people for their work, advice and support: Maisie Cohen, Frank Davey, Peter Hutchings and Lynette Sheridan Burns.

Hart Cohen and Antonio Castillo
Issue editors

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Notes

1 Lynch, Lisa, “We’re going to crack the world open,” *Journalism Practice*, 4: 3, 309 —318, first published on: July 8, 2010 (iFirst)

Note: We at Global Media Journal do not endorse the views of any of the authors who have contributed their work to this issue. However, we have respected their views and have scrutinised the materials submitted for fairness, accuracy and consistency. This is the gold standard of scholarship and journalistic integrity. We welcome reader comments and suggestions and any errors found will be acknowledged in updates to the issue on a regular basis.

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