



## Book Review of WikiLeaks: News in the Networked Era

Johanna C. Granville<sup>1</sup>

University of Debrecen, Hungary

*WikiLeaks: News in the Networked Era*. Charlie Beckett with James Ball, (February 13, 2012). Cambridge, UK. Polity Press. 198 pages. ISBN-13 978-0-7456-5975-6 (pbk).

“The press was protected so that it could bare the secrets of government and inform the people,” Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black wrote in 1971 during the famous court case about the Pentagon Papers (*New York Times Co. v. United States*, 403 U.S. 713). “The word 'security' is a broad, vague generality whose contours should not be invoked to abrogate the fundamental law embodied in the First Amendment. The guarding of military and diplomatic secrets at the expense of informed representative government provides no real security for our Republic.”

Nearly forty years later, US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton dubbed the WikiLeaks' exposures as a form of “terrorism,” in spite of the fact that – as far as we know - no one has died because of Wikileaks, and no one's property has been destroyed. Clinton and others condemned the theft of stolen government documents and questioned whether WikiLeaks was exposing official peccadillos for the good of society, or just airing the dirty laundry of governments it dislikes. (Among the quarter of a million classified documents leaked in 2010-2011, there was a cable issued by Hilary Clinton on July 31, 2009, instructing US diplomats to collect details about Indian diplomats stationed at the United Nations headquarters, including their credit card and frequent-flier numbers, which could then be used to track the movements of the Indian diplomats.)

In their new book, Charlie Beckett and James Ball pose a series of key questions. What is new about the WikiLeaks phenomenon and why is it important? Is WikiLeaks a form of journalism? What were the effects of WikiLeaks' revelations? How has WikiLeaks impacted the future of the internet? Beckett is founder and director of the journalism think tank Polis, as well as a former BBC reporter and author of *SuperMedia: Saving Journalism So It Can Save the World* (2008). James Ball is an investigative journalist for *The Guardian* newspaper and former WikiLeaks employee.

The book is organized into four chapters and an epilogue. Chapter one contains a brief historical sketch and demonstrates the ways in which WikiLeaks challenges not just governments, but both mainstream and alternative journalism as well. WikiLeaks is a nonprofit organization that accepts anonymous submissions of previously secret material

<sup>1</sup> Institute of English and American Studies, University of Debrecen 4032, Debrecen Egyetem tér 1, Hungary.

and publishes them on its internet site. Registered on October 4, 2006, WikiLeaks was managed by a small team of pro-transparency hackers, including the Australian Julian Assange (p. 18). As Beckett and Ball point out, WikiLeaks founders pioneered in the development of information security. WikiLeaks challenges the role of traditional media in the digital age. Unlike mainstream media, WikiLeaks is not constrained by commercial, technical, legal, and cultural boundaries (p. 9). It has been called the world's "first" stateless media organization (p. 5). Beckett and Ball opine that WikiLeaks itself is "not a revolutionary idea." Rather, it can be seen as a "radical hybrid combining 'hacktivism' with some of the traits of more traditional investigative journalism" (p. 3) At a time when mainstream media outlets have increasingly failed to check abuses of power, many argue that a network like WikiLeaks is sorely needed. As the authors put it, "When the infrastructure which supports journalism is owned entirely by companies, which at their start are free of a journalistic mission, the consequences are troubling and potentially threatening for the operation of a free press" (p. ix).

The authors also reveal a paradox, namely that while WikiLeaks and Assange repeatedly condemn governments for their lack of transparency, the WikiLeaks organization itself is very secret and non-transparent. In chapter two, the authors describe three of WikiLeaks' biggest "scoops" in 2010: the Afghan war logs (including the "Collateral Murder" video), the Iraq war logs, and the American Embassy cable releases. These were difficult to leak due to the sheer volume of documents. Assange and others knew that simply leaking so many documents would have very little impact on international public opinion. Earlier leaks had involved the publication of just one secret report. In 2007, for example, WikiLeaks leaked a report about the President of Kenya's extensive laundering of public money to buy property in the UK, New York, South Africa, and Australia.

In 2010, WikiLeaks signed contracts with mainstream papers like *The Guardian*, *New York Times*, *Der Spiegel*, and *El Pais* for them to interpret the documents and write articles providing context. The leaks had widespread effects. Arguably, the WikiLeaks exposés have altered people's thinking about how governments operate. Some – including Assange – are convinced the publication of the report of the Kenyan leadership's corruption sparked the civil unrest in Kenya during the December 2007 elections. When US Secretary of State Clinton bitterly condemned WikiLeaks' actions, it was not for WikiLeaks' use of the internet, but for its handling of "stolen government property" (100). Pro-government hackers managed to take WikiLeaks offline briefly (64). U.S. Senator Joe Lieberman called on enterprises like Amazon.com to ban WikiLeaks from using their servers (64). Indeed, the widespread effects of the leaks have made governments increasingly defensive about their lack of transparency.

But how has WikiLeaks influenced the future of the internet? In chapter three Beckett and Ball point out that WikiLeaks' disclosures – in jeopardizing lives and endangering sensitive diplomatic operations – might "create a freedom-of-expression backlash," thus helping pro-government, security-minded individuals who advocate limiting the openness of the internet.

Beckett and Ball are to be commended for writing one of the very first books to analyze WikiLeaks with respect to the evolution of contemporary journalism. As such, their book would be an excellent text to assign in graduate and undergraduate courses on journalism. Specialists in cyber security and professional journalists will also find the book to be insightful. On the other hand, in limiting themselves primarily to the role WikiLeaks

has played as a new form of journalism, the authors do not go far enough in describing the widespread effects of WikiLeaks' revelations. For example, they fail to capture the deep divisions WikiLeaks has spawned even among civil rights organizations. While many applaud WikiLeaks for exposing governments' violations of human rights, others – like Reporters without Borders – are appalled by the fact that sensitive diplomatic cables were stolen. These documents, like those in the “Afghan War Diary” tranche, revealed the identities of hundreds of people who collaborated with the coalition in Afghanistan, and thus, they claim, jeopardized their lives.

There are, of course, other books about the Wikileaks controversy. These others look more closely at the interpersonal tensions within the organization, the U.S. Army soldier Bradley Manning and the origins of the Afghan war leaks, the impact of the leaks on American foreign policy, and the role and personality of Julian Assange. See, for example, Daniel Domscheit-Berg's *Inside WikiLeaks: My Time with Julian Assange at the World's Most Dangerous Website* (2011); Denver Nicks' *Private: Bradley Manning, WikiLeaks, and the Biggest Exposure of Official Secrets in American History* (2012); Alexander Star's and Bill Keller's *Open Secrets: WikiLeaks, War, and American Diplomacy* (2011); and David Leigh's and Luke Harding's *WikiLeaks: Inside Julian Assange's War on Secrecy* (2011).