THE LEAK BEFORE THE STORM

WHAT WIKILEAKS TELLS US ABOUT MODERN COMMUNICATION

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In July, 77,000 secret documents on the Afghan War flooded the Internet, released into the public domain by whistle-blowing website *WikiLeaks*. As Western governments condemn the information deluge, they confirm that they remain ill-equipped to cope with the new communications reality, in which instantaneous news-making is a many-to-many exchange, across a variety of modes and media.

Forty years ago the Vietnam War spilled over to Cambodia and Laos, becoming an Indochina War. On the world's campuses Nixon and Che were the Manichean twins of student bed-sit decor. As undergraduate scribes, we would dream of entering the elite corps of investigative journalism. Finding inspiration in Hollywood's portrayal of *Washington Post* reporters and government whistle-blowers, we admired Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford negotiating secret trysts with shadowy figures. In real life, it would be many years before Deep Throat's identity became public knowledge. Daniel Ellsberg, however, was less fortunate. The man who leaked the Pentagon Papers to the *New York Times* in 1971 feared for his life then the same way Julian Assange, founder of *WikiLeaks*, does today. The prosecutor later told Ellsberg that a White House hit squad of Cubans had been brought up from Miami to 'incapacitate you totally' – CIA speak for 'kill'.[1] Four decades on, the White House is angry again. And Assange better look out, says Ellsberg. So too does Robert Gates at the Pentagon: Assange is giving the US a wide berth.[2]

The story so far: *WikiLeaks* calls itself a 'multi-jurisdictional public service designed to protect whistleblowers, journalists and activists who have sensitive materials to communicate to the public'.[3] It claims that once it publishes a document on the web, it is 'essentially impossible to censor'. In the last week of July 2010, the website released some 77,000 raw documents into the public domain in a historic collaboration with Britain's *Guardian* newspaper, America's *New York Times*, and Germany's *Der Spiegel* magazine. These were US military intelligence reports covering the conflict in Afghanistan between January 2004 and December 2009. Most are marked 'secret', which is not the highest level of US classification. Much of the content is routine. But once translated into everyday language some of the papers make for interesting, at times shocking, reading – at least to the average audience. The *Guardian* devoted fourteen pages to the leak, leading on the revelation of a special forces killing squad, and a US cover-up of the Taliban's acquisition of surface-to-air missiles.[4] *Spiegel*'s front cover carried the same Task Force 373 story, proclaiming America's secret war, followed by a seventeen-page spread.[5]

When the military's version of events, captured in the most economic of reporting styles, is correlated with journalists' contemporaneous accounts, the intelligence services and security forces invite inevitable criticism. By publishing this intelligence and press articles with their forensic follow-up, the Pentagon argues lives of Afghan informants have been put at risk and future trust in US intelligence has been severely undermined. Whether coalition forces or operational security have been endangered remains the subject of continuing investigations. The *New York Times* asserts it has been scrupulous in withholding informants' names cited in the reports; *WikiLeaks* has expressed regret should some of the raw documents compromise listed individuals and villages.[6] Assange claims some 15,000 further documents were held back from release to protect the vulnerable (making a total of around 92,000 documents in the 'Afghan War Diary'). But to make matters even more contentious, we are now promised a further *Wiki*-deluge from the Iraqi operations theatre, three times as large as the last.[7]

WikiLeaks' disclosure raises serious questions, the implications of which outweigh any individual news story, however disturbing. First, the knee-jerk response of governments has been to respond with state threat and force against the internet publisher. Who would have thought an Obama administration, catapulted into the White House on liberal and transparent values, would so soon turn into a playground bully? Yet it betrays a fear on the part of states that they are ill-equipped bureaucratically to deal with the speed and volume that today's media and

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In an attempt to respond to the WikiLeak on Afghanistan, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates (left) and Joint Chiefs Chairman Admiral Mike Mullen hold a press briefing at the Pentagon, 29 July 2010. *Courtesy of AP Photo/Kevin Wolf.*

state challengers can throw at them. Second, we are nowadays accustomed to utopian talk of an Information Age where the virtual or digital is supplanting actual and analogue communication. The verdict on July's publishing scoop is more nuanced. It shows that a symbiotic media relationship is growing, combining the reliability of traditional media with the 'shock of the new'. Third, modern governments are no further along the road to resolving the dilemma of strategic communications. Locked into a Cold War mindset of how to control and project state information, they remain in denial of the fragmenting media landscape and today's multivalent patchwork of domestic and global audiences. All in all, it prompts the basic question: have states really understood the degree to which they can influence the rapidly changing media ecology?

Meeting Information with Force

Obama has already outstripped all his predecessors in pursuing prosecutions for leaks.[8] And the White House means business, intolerant of a porous culture it sees as threatening government processes. But why? In short, this president's sensitivity is heightened by an intuitive understanding of the power of communications. Information was at the heart of Obama's candidacy. He hired Chris Hughes, co-founder of the internet social networking site *Facebook*, to mastermind *My.BarackObama.com*. He backed him with Joe Rospars, founder of Blue State Digital multimedia, designers of web-based political campaigns, to head up his own media campaign in 2008. So the implications of fast-moving information flows and their diffusion via web-based social networks were fully grasped. If Howard Dean's proselytising attempt at wired-up, grassroots politics in 2004 was a wade in the water, Obama's four years later was a gold medal Olympic dive.[9] So much so that the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells characterised the Obama move on Pennsylvania Avenue as a full-fledged peaceful insurgency. 35,000 local organising groups and 200,000 campaign events rose up from the soil as networks of individuals became insurgent communities.[10] What Obama discovered first-hand was the power of democratic, electronically connected information, where ordinary people could talk to like-minded citizens without journalists and editors (or the state) telling them what to think.

Thomas Drake, a former National Security Agency bureaucrat who revealed government waste to the *Baltimore Sun*, and 23 year-old Bradley Manning, a US Army intelligence analyst who supplied video-footage to *WikiLeaks* of an American helicopter attack on Baghdad civilians, are but two cases now under investigation. One has been indicted, the other arrested. That both appear to have acted out of honourable motives in the whistle-blower tradition has not prevented the Espionage Act from being dusted off. The president's Executive Order 13526 (29 December 2009) is now demanding an overhaul of the classification system. At the Federation of American Scientists, it is seen as a last-ditch attempt, as apocalyptic voices ask, 'can the national security classification system be fixed before it breaks down altogether in a frenzy of uncontrolled leaks?'[11] The language is even more hyperbolic on the Senate floor, where leaks are set in the wider context of cyber-threats. Senator Sheldon Whitehouse declaims the US is 'suffering what is probably the biggest transfer of wealth through theft and piracy in the history of mankind'. In Congress, currently over forty bills promoting cyber security are pending.[12]

But can governments today legislate against and prevent the free flow of information? To a large extent, yes. The United Arab Emirates recently moved to ban BlackBerry smartphone e-mailing, messaging and web browsing for 'judicial, social and national security reasons'. And Saudi Arabia has threatened to followed suit unless the server is located in Riyadh where messages could be monitored.[13] India's Home Ministry has also met

the company to discuss its demands for access to encrypted messaging and e-mails. All in the name of state security.[14] BlackBerries have a superior technology to other mobile phones, connecting consumers' encrypted data automatically via a central server in Canada when transmitting internationally, thus making local monitoring more difficult.[15] The Emirates' ban has been quickly challenged by the US State Department which fears a dangerous precedent.[16] For more conservative governments, digital technology is upping the ante in the information clash between state and citizen. Yet the paradox only serves to illustrate the complexity of the rapidly developing media world. Walking the line between free speech and censorship has always been a delicate affair for free societies. Freedom of information is the key to healthy democracy. But too much free information is considered damaging. Information in the wrong hands is even more destructive, says Hillary Clinton, with an eye to the Taliban: technological tools are being 'exploited to undermine human progress and political rights'. In the same breath she celebrates the achievements of a Colombian engineer whose appeals on the Internet brought 12 million protesters around the world onto the streets of 190 cities to speak out against Colombia's FARC guerrillas.[17] But who determines whose hands are the wrong hands? Even in a world where media technologies are unevenly distributed, the new dilemma is that technologies are finding ways around state controls. And states are struggling to find adequate responses. China, Burma and Iran have tackled the threat in various ways that have invited Western condemnation. Barriers between political elites and their populations are no longer as watertight as hitherto; borders between domestic and foreign domains are no longer as secure. The tried-and-tested answer of governments is to resort to censorship, jamming and arrest. In short, force.

More Speed, More Volume

Picture one's own desk, office, living room. Then try to imagine what 92,000 documents actually looks like. What the *WikiLeaks* episode illustrates is that this hoard represents potentially 92,000 journalistic stories, many of which might test government departments to breaking point. Yet it may all come down to the year you were born. Ministries are dominated by people born too early for the digital revolution. They may instinctively fail to grasp and respond to the changing nature of the *Wiki*-world. There is another problem. State bureaucracies are structured as multi-tiered hierarchies with many levels of junior, middle and senior managers. Already bureaucratically ponderous, these state communicators are caught in the trap of upward referral for decision-making in a business where time is at a premium. The concept of the 'shrinking timeline' is increasingly familiar to students of insurgency: when terrorists upload mobile phone and laptop images onto the net, and launch emotive image- and messaging-campaigns aimed at states, governments are too slow to counter. Media agencies are in fact in the same quandary. Government decision-making and response suffers from time lag, since civil servants are beholden for sign-off to political masters, who in turn have an eye permanently fixed on the anticipated reactions of their electorates. Meanwhile, responsible media organisations need time to check the veracity of information as it hits news desks, if they are to retain their hard-won professional authority. Checking facts takes time – more than is usually available in the digital era, where mobile phones and laptops can connect with target populations in an instant. Whoever is first in the marketplace sets the benchmark for the competition. Indeed, the tone of the debate. Speed, as Clausewitz noted, is a vital component of war, and in information wars, states are currently too slow off the mark. *WikiLeaks* has taken this a stage further. By combining speed with volume, it presents a potential systems overload for unsuspecting administrations. Electronic/digital media move vast amounts of data in split seconds across networks of consumers. It is in the nature of digital communications networks that when ideas or images find sympathetic viewers, surges spread virally and exponentially through populations distributed across international borders. Some of these epidemics fail to 'go critical': they die off in a matter of hours or days.[18] Others may find greater traction or 'stickiness', as Malcolm Gladwell describes it, and build into more enduring ideas and attitudes.[19] Speed and volume therefore threaten complex, bureaucratic hierarchies that form the backbone of modern states.

The Complex Media Ecology

To focus on technology is misleading. Technology shapes people, but people shape technology. Information or rather ideas make the world go around. If the *Wiki*-saga turns out to be a minor milestone in communications history, it will be because it has blended the best of the old with the new, creating a revitalised media production and dissemination network, while expanding the opportunities for ideas to circulate. The *Guardian*, *New York Times* and *Spiegel* are part of a dying breed. At least, in paper form. Witness the demise in the US of 166 newspapers that have either closed or ceased publishing print editions since 2008.[20] Many have already migrated or sought to cultivate their own plot on the Internet. Whether they successfully appeal to the 'iPad generation' could determine how we consume news in the future. When Assange struck a deal with these three papers, the strategy was smart. All three are beacon brands in the marketplace: more than just mirroring their demographic, they are aspirational magnets for their readers. They enjoy campaigning reputations, and are recognised for high-quality journalism. The *New York Times* has the third highest circulation of any paper in the US and the highest online following; *Guardian.co.uk* claims the second highest online presence (1.8 million browsers daily) compared with its British rivals. Just as importantly, all three invest in staff motivated to search out and develop stories. By acting in unison, *WikiLeaks* syndicated its litigation risk, and creates fresh networks of diffusion. While the newspapers reinforced their campaigning reputations – reminding readers they are still key players in the political game. Taken together these factors burnish brands that attract readers and users to their authority, accuracy and reliability, as much as their entertainment content.

The now infamous whistle-blowing website, *WikiLeaks*, publisher of thousands of documents pertaining to the Afghan War.

In the end, it is all about trust. In today's overcrowded information marketplace, consumers demand guidance. Brands like these are safe-havens amid the blur of competing products. To have dumped 92,000 files on the web on their own would have achieved eternal life for these documents: once released digitally, they will survive somewhere on some hard drive, being capable of rediscovery and resurrection some day. But it might not have stimulated universal attention. And that is where the three papers played their role. Broadcasters, including global brands such as the BBC, despite huge television, radio and online expenditure, still look to the press to break investigative stories. So what we end up with is a series of parallel mirrors that ultimately can send any civil servant or minister into a tailspin on a busy news day. It is tempting to view the web as a *tabula rasa* intersected by multiple, fluid and overlapping networks, with information ricocheting in the form of ideas, messages and images. However, rather than see it as a 'digital commons' – a democratic universe requiring no professional entry qualifications – we should instead look for its underlying circuits of authority and legitimacy. Mathieu O'Neil makes the same point: 'What is missing from portrayals of the Internet as a networked public sphere is an understanding of the impact network development has on online communication and organisation'.[21]

Authority is about more than being credible. O'Neil argues that the key ingredient is the 'capacity to influence, direct or manipulate the terms of the debate by defining the parameters of what is legitimate, worthwhile and interesting.'[22] Many innovators who were first into the Internet were able to import residual assets such as brand recognition. So their names naturally attracted loyal consumers. Whether through financial resources or an ability to ride the fashion of the moment, they built up investment in their 'relative position in an index of web pages' on internet search engines, becoming kingpins or major hubs.[23] Commonly known as nodes, these are individuals, groups or organisations linked by regular relationships based on shared interests, values or identities. Put simply, these website nodes become major traffic intersections to which millions of consumers are attracted. So although the web at first sight looks like a random domain, it is far from it. The challenge for the state is to move beyond its traditional approach to media where press, radio and TV are briefed, often according to the principle of favoured outlets receiving privileged disclosures. Instead it must understand that it now confronts a media ecology which is dynamic and 'switched on' twenty-four hours a day. Crucially the new mediascape is no longer solely determined by the editorial and business priorities of media corporations or political elites. It is a fluid environment which can be impacted by consumers at any time of the day and from any place in the world. News stories, and most importantly ideas, can take on a self-generating life of their own. So that demands a completely different approach to processing and using information. Even then, it is not sufficient to merely acknowledge that newspapers own websites. Amateur and professional blogs (even these adjectives seem outmoded) and the general public have low-cost means and easily acquired know-how to capture and transmit messages into the mediascape at will. Furthermore, media organisations now scour the web for consumer-generated content that they can refashion and further disseminate. As Harold Lasswell opined many decades ago: whoever said communications was simple?[24]

Twenty-First Century Communication

Strategic communications is dead – at least, in the way we have come to know it. Gone are the certainties of a stable audience, clear-cut enemy, and reliable home support. Broadly speaking, it worked in the Cold War because bipolar geopolitics encouraged simple dichotomies. The competing propositions were clearly differentiated, with opposing sets of values and visions of society. Hence, they were easier to distil and communicate to audiences at home and abroad. Today's audiences, however, are more sophisticated in the way they interpret information from governments, less trusting of government itself. Very loosely, strategic communications meant governments publicly talking to other governments, and public diplomacy entailed governments addressing the populations of other governments. When George W Bush claimed that we were either with or against him, he betrayed a hankering after a simpler world with the tried-and-tested modi operandi of generations past. Today, Washington is suffering a definitional crisis wondering what strategic communications actually means, to the extent that Obama has called for urgent clarification.[25] What is missing from the debate is a visceral

recognition that the world has changed in the last two or three decades. Not just with the demise of the Cold War, but through the globalisation of audiences and the media ecology. That translates as new digital technologies (satellite TV, computers, mobile phones) connect populations globally in a many-to-many or peer-to-peer process. This is unlike the 'traditional' media (press, terrestrial TV, radio, cinema), which conceived of communicating to audiences as a one-way street: a one-to-many relationship. At the same time, the instant delivery of images via satellite TV and the web has introduced the global into the local, and vice versa, in a circular, iterative movement. The result is paradoxical: cultural homogenisation occurs as outside ideas are absorbed and reprocessed. Yet pluralism and political fragmentation simultaneously unfold, as groups seek the safety of local identities amid a sea of change, encouraged by digital technologies that allow audiences to be segmented in ways familiar to any marketer.

The Strategic Communications Letdown

At the end of the last decade, Joseph Turow famously saw American society entering a new era of fragmentation. It was breaking up into notional 'gated communities' defined by lifestyle as a consequence, in no small part, of the shifting balance between 'extrovert society-making media' and 'introvert segment-making media'. That meant TV, once the great unifier in society, was now multiplying its channels. And under pressure from commercial marketing, it was driving communities apart. Each new outlet was being shaped to cater for distinct and segmented audiences.[26] But the anthropologist Luther Gerlach was already flagging a move towards segmentation in the West during the 1960s Counter-culture, when he observed how political oppositional groups organised themselves into leaderless, fluid, strategic alliances. The result was ever-evolving networks of spontaneous social actors.[27] We need to remind ourselves that this postmodern trend in analysis accompanies a wider intellectual process of looking beyond the nineteenth and twentieth century 'crowd' or 'mass' in order to understand collective action in society. David Kilcullen's 'anthropological' approach to counter-insurgency is a natural corollary of this thinking.[28] For too long, Western governments have regarded foreign populations, particularly in developing states, as a homogenous mass. Strategic communications has always functioned best with simple overarching messages that appeal to fundamental values. These plug into a subset of policy ideas, which need to be harmonious and consistent if they are to have any chance of influencing the actions of populations. Authenticity means messages must ring true: it is a term familiar in corporate and political marketing. Ultimately, they must culturally chime with concerns and ambitions in a particular context. The problem is strategic communications plays to homogeneity.

In the Afghan conflict, the terrain has been heterogeneous. And that is why the *WikiLeaks* revelation is so damaging from Washington's perspective. While the stop-go reasons for NATO/ISAF intervention have been evident in recent years (hunting Al-Qa'ida, chasing out the Taliban, building a centralised state, developing regional political economies, eliminating the opium trade, introducing human and gender rights, extending education), the hidden stories unveil a darker picture. The view of an attritional war has emerged, where intervention forces have to play dirty; it belies the rhetoric of soldiers as aid workers. None of this may surprise strategic and military affairs specialists, or even foreign news correspondents. But how many British or American citizens believe their taxes are funding military death squads? Significantly, it further undermines any message cohesion coalition forces and their governments have been attempting to project across divergent, fragmented audiences – both on Afghan soil, and equally significantly in the domestic constituencies of those expeditionary nations. If strategic communications is to work, it must speak to local, national, regional and global audiences simultaneously, projecting harmonious, sustained, interlocking messages. A very tall order.

All too few commentators understand this. Some do highlight the need to be sensitive to the local context if eventual success is to be achieved. But just focusing on the complexities of cultural variation maybe is too narrow a perspective. It skirts the key question: can strategic messaging ever be successfully imposed from external sources? There is an implicit expectation that given the right configuration of local conditions and a golden key, old style influence and communications can work their magic once again. But the discussion remains locked in a twentieth-century concept of communications. In Afghanistan, a state sovereign only through the recognition of the international community, the pre-modern co-exists alongside the modern and occasionally postmodern. Nowhere is this better exemplified than how rural Afghans communicate on mobile phones. The Asia Foundation recorded that by 2009, every second Afghan could access a mobile phone (81 per cent urban, 44 per cent rural households), consistent with the UN's assessment that by the end of 2007, 45 per cent of the populations in developing countries (the fastest growing markets globally) had mobile phones.[29] Any true test of opening communications space goes beyond just expanding the number of phone-in shows in a country where radio thrives, however productive this may be. More imaginative measures are called for, such as distributing a free mobile phone and free airtime to every one of Afghanistan's 29 million people, regardless of large numbers falling into the hands of hostile Taliban.

The point is that a communications space works best when obstacles of infrastructure are removed, allowing unlimited and exponential communication within populations. Let ideas find their own levels. But this is what states do not want. Unregulated and uncontrolled space beyond the restraints of state agencies undermines command-and-control mindsets on which states are built. Organic processes of opinion-forming are antithetical to ISAF's notion of strategic communications – unless they align with the Western liberal project. Inevitably there will be critics who view all this as informational

laissez-faire. Whatever happened to the 'strategic' in strategic communications, they will ask. In the end it takes a major leap of faith to let Afghans formulate their own vision for their society; and a new feel for flows of ideas and images in the digital space, if we are to 'persuade' and 'attract' populations according to the tenets of Joseph Nye's 'soft power.'[30]

The shock-horror of the recent leaks is perhaps neither shocking nor horrific enough to dominate the news, which is a strange indictment on our confused ambivalence towards the Afghan War. Nevertheless, as this edition goes to press, the initial furore is abating. Juicy reports of counter-insurgent subterfuge are not the issue. The *Wiki* phenomenon highlights the fundamental question of control for modern states. Crucially, the context is a crisis of audience fragmentation. We have reached the point where state bureaucracies have to innovate to influence and persuade populations in all their diversity. When the domestic and foreign become so technologically conjoined, is it productive or indeed responsible to cling to traditional notions of information command-and-control? Assange's organisation is a symptom, not the cause. Instead of looking to pursue him though the courts, governments should turn to a new generation of communicator born into the digital Information Age. ■

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Notes

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