WikiLeaks, Canadian Media, and Democracy
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Introduction: A Wikileaks in the System
WikiLeaks has proven a rich source of news, however tenuous its journalistic status. WikiLeaks certainly thinks of itself as doing the work of journalism, as evidenced in Julian Assange’s comment: “It is the role of good journalism to take on powerful abusers, and when powerful abusers are taken on, there’s always a bad reaction. So we see that controversy, and we believe that is a good thing to engage in.” WikiLeaks’ inherent structure, principally anonymity, is in fact antithetical to journalism and leaves the organization an odd blend of information leaker, newsmaker, editorizer, self-styled journalist, and general unclassified news medium.

WikiLeaks has vaulted onto the international stage to a mix of adulation and anger. The international, non-profit organization is in possession of some “1.5 million documents so far from dissident communities and anonymous sources.” Since the founding of WikiLeaks in 2006, the organization has released sensitive documents of a political, legal, martial or economic nature. The releases have made shockwaves in international diplomacy, the world economy, and every level of politics. Thus, WikiLeaks has garnered both public awe and public ire. In turn, Canadian journalists and the Canadian blogosphere have buzzed with questions. “Is anonymous leaking and faceless journalism ethical?” “Does this style of reporting endanger or protect?” “Is WikiLeaks democratic or anarchistic?” If one can step back from the rhetoric that surrounds WikiLeaks, there is an opportunity for reflection on the importance of responsible journalism—what I will call in this essay “journalism with a face.” Particularly, it is valuable for a democratic society to hold journalists professionally accountable for publications, to ask their media to publish in a meaningful context, and to insist that a healthy public dialogue is created through journalistic work. In short, WikiLeaks demonstrates that in the
Canadian context (or in any democratic nation), a media that is accountable to the public is invaluable.

The Upside of Wikileaks: The Public’s Right to Know

The “company profile,” and informal mandate, of WikiLeaks is defined as: “WikiLeaks is a distributed organization which publishes and analyzes information through an uncensorable approach—focusing on documents, photos, and video which have political or social significance.” WikiLeaks has been awarded both the 2008 Economist New Media Award and the 2009 Amnesty International New Media Award. The stories that WikiLeaks has broken include: politically motivated killings and disappearances in Kenya, a myriad of embarrassing stories, facts, and loose talk about politicians and diplomats, a controversial video of the allegedly unprovoked killing of innocents by U.S. soldiers in Baghdad, and details of the treatment of detainees in Guantanamo Bay. These stories have exposed government lies, human rights abuses, and private sentiments and opinions. In this way, WikiLeaks has disclosed vital information to the otherwise unwitting public.

The Downside of Wikileaks: Anonymity and Inappropriate Information Disclosure

WikiLeaks has also come under fire from governments such as Australia, France, Iran, and the United States for a host of reasons. Some nations, organizations, and individual citizens have called into question the validity of the information released. Others have accused WikiLeaks of editorializing “unbiased” leaks. One particularly contentious video, dubbed Collateral Murder, has been heavily criticized as an edit of the original “uncensored” video. Additionally, some have criticized WikiLeaks for endangering careers, relationships, and lives by its cavalier decisions to release private documents.

Some have argued that WikiLeaks will actually mean that people will be less likely to engage in resistance exercises that may be compromised by an anonymous leak. Still others have made the point that WikiLeaks may choose to release only whatever leaks support the agendas of insiders or may even blatantly falsify documents and “leak” them.
The Stumbling Block: Wikileaks as Simultaneous Social Good and Social Evil

So we find ourselves at an impasse. There are impressive reasons for and against WikiLeaks—and, more broadly speaking, anonymous, faceless journalism. Neither the merits nor the dangers can be dismissed or trumped by the other in any de facto manner. We love WikiLeaks, we hate WikiLeaks. Or more importantly, we have reason to love WikiLeaks, we have reason to hate WikiLeaks. And so we find ourselves either caught with an ambivalent attitude toward WikiLeaks or mired in polemic side-taking and name-calling. Though I do not dream that I am able to resolve all the ethical questions of WikiLeaks, I do believe that these ethical problems offer an opportunity for reflection on the importance of responsible media. In the Canadian context—our context—the media plays a vital informational role that is in danger of being distorted by the effects of anonymous journalism. For democracy to continue to thrive in Canada, an accountable, honest media must flourish. Without passing judgment on the complex ethical and moral questions of WikiLeaks, I hold that there is no doubt that in daily journalism practice, democracy needs a media with a face.

Accountability in the Canadian Media

Journalists of the Canadian media are held accountable for what they have published. When journalists do not work behind the mask of anonymity, they must be willing to put their career, principles, and reputation on the line with every story they publish. Thus, members of the Canadian media (as individuals or organizations) must be professionally responsible—must “own up”—to what they have written. There is obvious value to accountability in journalism. Let us consider three values of a professionally accountable media; the three values of media with a face.

One: Context and Category

The published work of any journalist or news source may be evaluated and reviewed in the context of a larger agenda, opinion, tone, and perspective. Though all worthwhile journalism strives for an unbiased weighing of all sides of an issue, there is no doubt that news outlets and individual journalists have distinct perspectives. Therefore, an article found in one of the major national newspapers or in a special-interest magazine or on a blog can be fairly contextualized by what has been previously published by that organization in general and that journalist in particular. Criticism and praise of a political party, organization, social movement, etc. are best
understood with a healthy appreciation of the underlying reasons and history of the author’s sympathies. To get a thorough understanding of these sympathies it is imperative to evaluate both the journalist’s previous publications and any links with organizations reported on. Furthermore, having categories to help us understand journalism is worthwhile. An article read in the opinion section of a newspaper, in a trade journal, or a comments board online are all read in the tone of the category in which they are published. It is difficult to know what the tone in the category of anonymous journalism is because the reasons for protecting identity are diverse and potentially malicious. Where anonymous journalism and pseudo-journalism leave a trail of context-less information disclosed by people for a myriad of unknown reasons (political leanings, personal retribution, religious beliefs, etc.) responsible Canadian journalism promotes contextualized reporting.

**Two: Responsibility and Repercussion**

Dangerous, slanderous, inappropriate and offensive material cannot be published without repercussions. In Section 2b of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the: “freedom of thought, belief, opinion, and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication” is guaranteed. Unfortunately, some have taken freedom of the press to mean that unprofessional, reckless or slanderous writing is acceptable. This is simply untrue. Section 1 of the Charter states: “The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees the rights and freedoms set out in it subject only to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society.” I am not interested in attempting to build a legal case; rather my point is simply this: freedom of speech does not mean that all expression is accepted and valued in a democratic society. Take as an example hate speech—not protected under the Canadian Charter as a ruling of the *R. v. Keegstra* case. Anonymous journalism working under the guise of “freedom of the press” that engages in hate speech, slander or endangers lives/national defence is the antithesis of democratic free speech. The structure of accountability—the imperative to self-identify, support your claims, and answer detractors—means the Canadian media does not allow the unchecked, dangerous, and destructive derivatives of free speech to run amok. In a global context where secrets that endanger national security can be published anonymously, it is clear that accountable journalism is vital to the democratic process.
Three: Disagreement and Dialogue

Journalism with a face leaves room for rebuttal, collaboration, and dialogue—the very heart of democracy. Faceless, non-contextualized journalism cannot be rebutted or engaged in any meaningful dialogue. It comes from nowhere and has no face for healthy dialogue. From WikiLeaks we have at times seen mass frustration not simply because of the content leaked, but because there is no legitimate, fair venue for retort. In this way the faceless gain the advantage by being unseen in their accusations, whereas those who have been implicated via leaks are sometimes unfairly vaulted into the public eye without an opportunity for a contextualized conversation with an opponent. The Canadian media is essential to democracy because it takes the form of democracy—it promotes dialogue and gives a venue for disagreement. Dialogue requires that two or more equals come to the table with honesty about their convictions. Dialogue requires that people look one another in the face and debate, argue, agree, and negotiate. Dialogue requires that people offer to one another, as a show of good faith and respect that is the backdrop for any productive conversation, their own faces. Dialogue cannot be done with the faceless, and a society without dialogue—even heated dialogue—is forever in danger of power concentrations and power vacuums that are antithetical to democracy.

Media with Accountability as a Daily Dose of Democracy

Literary giant Mark Twain once said, “There are laws to protect the freedom of the press’s speech, but none that are worth anything to protect the people from the press.” Twain’s words take on poignant, frightening new meaning in a context that includes anonymous journalism done from all corners of the globe. Anonymity is understandable, perhaps even courageous, in contexts of totalitarian regimes, hidden corruption, and flagrant human rights abuses. However, anonymity is indefensible, sometimes abhorrent, in various other contexts. As a daily model for journalism in a democratic society it is unreliable and unsafe. Because of the problems in the structure of anonymous journalism, the Canadian public—and Canadian democracy in general—are dependent on an accountable media. We may not always agree with what is printed in our newspapers, but the fact that we can know the identity of the writers—and disagree with the writers—means that, as far as our media is concerned, democracy is still at work.
STRUCTURE AND TECHNIQUE

The article argues that WikiLeaks is not a reliable journalistic source as its use of anonymous sources does not allow for rebuttal.

The author establishes the controversy around WikiLeaks’s by offering a definition of “good journalism” from Julian Assange, the founder of the renegade news organization. By quoting Assange, the author is able to contrast WikiLeaks’s practices against its founder’s definition of journalism. The author then questions WikiLeaks’s journalistic merit by providing examples of questions from “Canadian journalists and the Canadian blogosphere.” At this point, the author offers a thinly veiled thesis statement regarding the necessity for “media that is accountable to the public.”

The author refers statement of purpose from WikiLeaks then counters this purpose with opposition from governments around the world. Further criticism of WikiLeaks’s mission statement is attributed to a generalized source when the author writes, “Some have argued…”. Having established the global criticism of and opposition to WikiLeaks, the author states his opinion, and the thesis of the article, that “in daily journalism practice, democracy needs a media with a face.”

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. Do the arrest of Bradley Manning, a soldier accused of leaking top secret information in 2010, and the charges laid against WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange challenge the author’s statement that journalists must be unafraid to go on record? Can their arrests be seen as evidence for a need for anonymity when reporting sensitive material? Why or why not?

2. Does knowledge of a writer’s opinions and biases influence how their work is read and interpreted? What does the author say? What do you think?

3. The article states that WikiLeaks has won “New Media” awards from The Economist (2008) and Amnesty International (2009). How does the author explain recognition from these respected organizations in light of his argument that WikiLeaks is not a legitimate source of journalism?

4. The author believes that “freedom of speech does not mean that all expression is accepted and valued in a democratic society.” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Construct an argument that sup-
ports the author’s statement by using examples from the article and from your own experience. What are the dangers of unrestricted speech?

5. Construct a counterargument that states free speech cannot be limited in any way? What are the problems associated with monitoring and limiting free speech?

6. Invent a situation wherein withholding information is in the best interest of the public health. Consider what information should be disseminated and what information should be withheld? Who has the authority to decide?

7. According to the author, when is it acceptable for journalists to remain anonymous?