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Twelve theses on WikiLeaks

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Vindictive, politicized, conspiratorial, reckless: one need not agree with WikiLeaks' modus operandi to acknowledge its service to democracy. Geert Lovink and Patrice Riemens see in WikiLeaks indications of a new culture of exposure beyond the traditional politics of openness and transparency.

Thesis 0

“What do I think of WikiLeaks? I think it would be a good idea!” (after Mahatma Gandhi's famous quip on “Western Civilization”)

Thesis 1

Disclosures and leaks have been a feature of all eras, however never before has a non-state or non- corporate affiliated group done anything on the scale of what WikiLeaks has managed to do, first with the “collateral murder” video, then the “Afghan War Logs”, and now “Cablegate”. It looks like we have now reached the moment that the quantitative leap is morphing into a qualitative one. When WikiLeaks hit the mainstream early in 2010, this was not yet the case. In a sense, the “colossal” WikiLeaks disclosures can be explained as the consequence of the dramatic spread of IT use, together with the dramatic drop in its costs, including for the storage of millions of documents. Another contributing factor is the fact that safekeeping state and corporate secrets – never mind private ones – has become difficult in an age of instant reproducibility and dissemination. WikiLeaks becomes symbolic for a transformation in the “information society” at large, holding up a mirror of things to come. So while one can look at WikiLeaks as a (political) project and criticize it for its modus operandi, it can also be seen



as the “pilot” phase in an evolution towards a far more generalized culture of anarchic exposure, beyond the traditional politics of openness and transparency.

Thesis 2

For better or for worse, WikiLeaks has skyrocketed itself into the realm of high-level international politics. Out of the blue, WikiLeaks has become a full-blown player both on the world scene as well as in the national spheres of some countries. Small player as it is, WikiLeaks, by virtue of its disclosures, appears to be on a par with governments or big corporations (its next target) – at least in the domain of information gathering and publication. At same time, it is unclear whether this is a permanent feature or a temporary, hype-induced phenomenon – WikiLeaks appears to believe the former, and that looks more and more likely to be the case. Despite being a puny non-state and non-corporate actor, in its fight against the US government WikiLeaks does not believe it is punching above its weight – and is starting to behave accordingly. One might call this the “Talibanization” stage of the postmodern “Flat World” theory, where scales, times and places are declared largely irrelevant. What counts is celebrity momentum and the intense accumulation of media attention. WikiLeaks manages to capture that attention by way of spectacular information hacks, where other parties, especially civil society groups and human rights organizations, are desperately struggling to get their message across. While the latter tend to play by the rules and seek legitimacy from dominant institutions, WikiLeaks’ strategy is populist insofar that it taps into public disaffection with mainstream politics. Political legitimacy, for WikiLeaks, is no longer something graciously bestowed by the powers that be. WikiLeaks bypasses this Old World structure of power and instead goes to the source of political legitimacy in today’s info-society: the rapturous banality of the spectacle. WikiLeaks brilliantly puts to use the “escape velocity” of IT, using IT to leave IT behind and rudely irrupt the realm of real-world politics.

Thesis 3

In the ongoing saga called “The Decline of the US Empire”, WikiLeaks enters the stage as the slayer of a soft target. It would be difficult to imagine it being able to inflict quite same damage to the Russian or Chinese governments, or even to the Singaporean – not to mention their “corporate”



affiliates. In Russia or China, huge cultural and linguistic barriers are at work, not to speak of purely power-related ones, which would need to be surmounted. Vastly different constituencies are also factors there, even if we are speaking about the narrower (and allegedly more global) cultures and agendas of hackers, info-activists and investigative journalists. In that sense, WikiLeaks in its present manifestation remains a typically “western” product and cannot claim to be a truly universal or global undertaking.

Thesis 4

One of the main difficulties with explaining WikiLeaks arises from the fact that it is unclear (also to the WikiLeaks people themselves) whether it sees itself and operates as a content provider or as a simple conduit for leaked data (the impression is that it sees itself as either/or, depending on context and circumstances). This, by the way, has been a common problem ever since media went online en masse and publishing and communications became a service rather than a product. Julian Assange cringes every time he is portrayed as the editor-in-chief of WikiLeaks; yet WikiLeaks says it edits material before publication and claims it checks documents for authenticity with the help of hundreds of volunteer analysts. Content vs. carrier debates of this kind have been going on for decades among media activists, with no clear outcome. Instead of trying to resolve the inconsistency, it might be better to look for fresh approaches and develop new critical concepts for what has become a hybrid publishing practice involving actors far beyond the traditional domain of the professional news media. This might be why Assange and his collaborators refuse to be labelled in terms of “old categories” (journalists, hackers, etc.) and claim to represent a new *Gestalt* on the world information stage.

Thesis 5

The steady decline of investigative journalism caused by diminishing funding is an undeniable fact. Journalism these days amounts to little more than outsourced PR remixing. The continuous acceleration and over-crowding of the so-called attention economy ensures there is no longer enough room for complicated stories. The corporate owners of mass circulation media are increasingly disinclined to see the workings and the politics of the global neoliberal economy discussed at length. The shift from information to infotainment has been embraced by journalists themselves, making it



difficult to publish complex stories. WikiLeaks enters this state of affairs as an outsider, enveloped by the steamy ambiance of “citizen journalism”, DIY news reporting in the blogosphere and even faster social media like Twitter. What WikiLeaks anticipates, but so far has been unable to organize, is the “crowd sourcing” of the interpretation of its leaked documents. That work, oddly, is left to the few remaining staff journalists of selected “quality” news media. Later, academics pick up the scraps and spin the stories behind the closed gates of publishing stables. But where is networked critical commentariat? WikiLeaks generates its capacity to inspire irritation at the big end of town precisely because of the transversal and symbiotic relation it holds with establishment media institutions. There’s a lesson here for the multitudes – get out of the ghetto and connect with the Oedipal other. Therein lies the conflictual terrain of the political.

Traditional investigative journalism used to consist of three phases: unearthing facts, crosschecking these and backgrounding them into an understandable discourse. WikiLeaks does the first, claims to do the second, but omits the third completely. This is symptomatic of a particular brand of open access ideology, where content production itself is externalized to unknown entities “out there”. The crisis in investigative journalism is neither understood nor recognized. How productive entities are supposed to sustain themselves materially is left in the dark: it is simply presumed that analysis and interpretation will be taken up by the traditional news media. But this is not happening automatically. The saga of the Afghan War Logs and Cablegate demonstrate that WikiLeaks has to approach and negotiate with well-established traditional media to secure sufficient credibility. At the same time, these media outlets prove unable to fully process the material, inevitably filtering the documents according to their own editorial policies.

Thesis 6

WikiLeaks is a typical SPO (Single Person Organization, or “UPO”: Unique Personality Organization). This means that the initiative taking, decision-making and execution is largely concentrated in the hands of a single individual. Like small and medium-sized businesses, the founder cannot be voted out, and, unlike many collectives, leadership does not rotate. This is not an uncommon feature within organizations, irrespective of whether they operate in the realm of politics, culture or the “civil society” sector. SPOs are recognizable, exciting, inspiring, and easy to feature in the media. Their sustainability, however, is largely dependent on the actions of their



charismatic leader, and their functioning is difficult to reconcile with democratic values. This is also why they are difficult to replicate and do not scale up easily. Sovereign hacker Julian Assange is the identifying figurehead of WikiLeaks, the organization's notoriety and reputation merging with Assange's own. What WikiLeaks does and stands for becomes difficult to distinguish from Assange's rather agitated private life and his somewhat unpolished political opinions.

Thesis 7

WikiLeaks raises the question as to what hackers have in common with secret services, since an elective affinity between the two is unmistakable. The love-hate relationship goes back to the very beginning of computing. One does not have to be a fan of German media theorist Friedrich Kittler or, for that matter, conspiracy theories, to acknowledge that the computer was born out of the military-industrial complex. From Alan Turing's deciphering of the Nazi Enigma code up to the role played by the first computers in the invention of the atomic bomb, from the cybernetics movement up to the Pentagon's involvement in the creation of the Internet – the articulation between computational information and the military-industrial complex is well established. Computer scientists and programmers have shaped the information revolution and the culture of openness; but at the same time they have also developed encryption (“crypto”), closing access to data for the non-initiated. What some see as “citizen journalism” others call “info war”.

WikiLeaks is also an organization deeply shaped by 1980s hacker culture, combined with the political values of techno-libertarianism that emerged in the 1990s. The fact that WikiLeaks was founded – and to a large extent is still run – by hard-core geeks is essential to understanding its values and moves. Unfortunately, this comes together with a good dose of the less savoury aspects of hacker culture. Not that idealism, the desire to contribute to making the world a better place, could be denied to WikiLeaks: on the contrary. But this brand of idealism (or, if you prefer, anarchism) is paired with a preference for conspiracies, an elitist attitude and a cult of secrecy (never mind condescension). This is not conducive to collaboration with like-minded people and groups, who are relegated to being the simple consumers of WikiLeaks output. The missionary zeal to enlighten the idiotic masses and “expose” the lies of government, the military and corporations is reminiscent of the well-known (or infamous) media-culture paradigm from



the 1950s.

Thesis 8

Lack of commonality with congenial, “another world is possible” movements drives WikiLeaks to seek public attention by way of increasingly spectacular and risky disclosures, thereby gathering a constituency of often wildly enthusiastic, but generally passive supporters. Assange himself has stated that WikiLeaks has deliberately moved away from the “egocentric” blogosphere and assorted social media and nowadays collaborates only with professional journalists and human rights activists. Yet following the nature and quantity of WikiLeaks exposures from its inception up to the present day is eerily reminiscent of watching a firework display, and that includes a “grand finale” in the form of the doomsday-machine pitched, yet-to-be-unleashed “insurance” document (“.aes256”). This raises serious doubts about the long-term sustainability of WikiLeaks itself, and possibly also of the WikiLeaks model. WikiLeaks operates with ridiculously small staff – probably no more than a dozen of people form the core of its operation. While the extent and savviness of WikiLeaks’ tech support is proved by its very existence, WikiLeaks’ claim to several hundreds of volunteer analysts and experts is unverifiable and, to be frank, barely credible. This is clearly WikiLeaks Achilles’ heel, not only from a risk and/or sustainability standpoint, but politically as well – which is what matters to us here.

Thesis 9

WikiLeaks displays a stunning lack of transparency in its internal organization. Its excuse that “WikiLeaks needs to be completely opaque in order to force others to be totally transparent” amounts, in our opinion, to little more than *Mad* magazine’s famous Spy vs. Spy cartoons. You beat the opposition but in a way that makes you indistinguishable from it. Claiming the moral high ground afterwards is not helpful – Tony Blair too excelled in that exercise. As WikiLeaks is neither a political collective nor an NGO in the legal sense, and nor, for that matter, a company or part of social movement, we need to discuss what type of organization it is that we are dealing with. Is WikiLeaks a virtual project? After all, it does exist as a (hosted) website with a domain name, which is the bottom line. But does it have a goal beyond the personal ambition of its founder(s)? Is WikiLeaks reproducible? Will we see the rise of national or local chapters that keep the name? What rules of the



game will they observe? Should we rather see it as a concept that travels from context to context and that, like a meme, transforms itself in time and space?

Thesis 10

Maybe WikiLeaks will organize itself around its own version of the Internet Engineering Task Force's slogan "rough consensus and running code"? Projects like Wikipedia and Indymedia have both resolved this issue in their own ways, but not without crises, conflicts and splits. A critique such as the one voiced here is not intended to force WikiLeaks into a traditional format; on the contrary, it is to explore whether WikiLeaks (and its future clones, associates, avatars and congenial family members) might stand as a model for new forms of organization and collaboration. The term "organized network" has been coined as a possible term for these formats. Another term has been "tactical media". Still others have used the generic term "internet activism". Perhaps WikiLeaks has other ideas about the direction it wants to take. But where? It is up to WikiLeaks to decide for itself. Up to now, however, we have seen very little by way of an answer, leaving others to raise questions, for example about the legality of WikiLeaks' financial arrangements (*Wall Street Journal*).

We cannot flee the challenge of experimenting with post-representational networks. As ur-blogger Dave Winer wrote about the Apple developers, "it's not that they're ill-intentioned, they're just ill-prepared. More than their users, they live in a Reality Distortion Field, and the people who make the Computer For the Rest of Us have no clue who the rest of us are and what we are doing. But that's okay, there's a solution. Do some research, ask some questions, and listen."

Thesis 11

The widely shared critique of the self-inflicted celebrity cult of Julian Assange invites the formulation of alternatives. Wouldn't it be better to run WikiLeaks as an anonymous collective or "organized network"? Some have expressed the wish to see many websites doing the same work. One group around Daniel Domscheit-Berg, who parted company with Assange in September, is already known to be working on a WikiLeaks clone. What is overlooked in this call for a proliferation of WikiLeaks is the amount of expert knowledge



required to run a leak site successfully. Where is the ABC tool-kit of WikiLeaks? There is, perhaps paradoxically, much secrecy involved in this way of making-things-public. Simply downloading a WikiLeaks software kit and getting going is not a realistic option. WikiLeaks is not a plug 'n' play blog application like WordPress, and the word "Wiki" in its name is really misleading, as Wikipedia's Jimmy Wales has been at pains to stress. Contrary to the collaboration philosophy of Wikipedia, WikiLeaks is a closed shop run with the help of an unknown number of faceless volunteers. One is forced to acknowledge that the know-how necessary to run a facility like WikiLeaks is pretty arcane. Documents not only need to be received anonymously, but also to be further anonymized before they are released online. They also need to be "edited" before being dispatched to the servers of international news organizations and trusted, influential "papers of record".

WikiLeaks has built up a lot of trust and confidence over the years. Newcomers will need to go through that same, time-consuming process. The principle of WikiLeaks is not to "hack" (into state or corporate networks) but to facilitate insiders based in these large organisations to copy sensitive, confidential data and pass it on to the public domain - while remaining anonymous. If you are aspiring to become a leak node, you'd better start to get acquainted with processes like OPSEC or operations security, a step-by-step plan which "identifies critical information to determine if friendly actions can be observed by adversary intelligence systems, determines if information obtained by adversaries could be interpreted to be useful to them, and then executes selected measures that eliminate or reduce adversary exploitation of friendly critical information" (Wikipedia). The WikiLeaks slogan says: "courage is contagious". According to experts, people who intend to run a WikiLeaks-type operation need nerves of steel. So before we call for one, ten, many WikiLeaks, let's be clear that those involved run risks. Whistleblower protection is paramount. Another issue is the protection of people mentioned in the leaks. The Afghan Warlogs showed that leaks can also cause "collateral damage". Editing (and eliding) is crucial. Not only OPSEC, also OPETHICS. If publishing is not carried out in a way that is absolutely secure for all concerned, there is a definite risk that the "revolution in journalism" - and politics - unleashed by WikiLeaks will be stopped in its tracks.

Thesis 12



We do not think that taking a stand for or against WikiLeaks is what matters most. WikiLeaks is here to stay, until it either scuttles itself or is destroyed by opposing forces. Our point is rather to (try to) assess and ascertain what WikiLeaks can, could - and maybe even should - do, and to help formulate how "we" could relate to and interact with WikiLeaks. Despite all its drawbacks, and against all odds, WikiLeaks has rendered a sterling service to the cause of transparency, democracy and openness. As the French would say, if something like it did not exist, it would have to be invented. The quantitative - and what looks soon to become the qualitative - turn of information overload is a fact of contemporary life. The glut of disclosable information can only be expected to continue grow - and exponentially so. To organize and interpret this Himalaya of data is a collective challenge that is clearly out there, whether we give it the name "WikiLeaks" or not.

This is an extended version of an article first published on the nettime mailing list and elsewhere in August 2010