

Who's a Global Citizen? Julian Assange, *WikiLeaks* and the Australian Media Reaction

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ABSTRACT

The global release of 250,000 United States Embassy diplomatic cables to selected media sties worldwide through the WikiLeaks web site was arguably the major global media event of 2010. As well as the implications of the content of the cables for international politics and diplomacy, the actions of WikiLeaks and its controversial editor-in-chief, the Australian Julian Assange, bring together a range of arguments about how the media, news and journalism are being transformed in the 21st century. This paper will focus on the reactions of Australian online news media sites to the release of the diplomatic cables by WikiLeaks, including both the online sites of established news outlets such as The Australian, Sydney Morning Herald and The Age, the ABC's The Drum site, and online-only sites such as Crikey, New Matilda and On Line Opinion. The study focuses on opinion and commentary rather than straight news reportage, and analysis is framed around five issues: WikiLeaks and international diplomacy; the Australian government's reaction to the cable release; implications of WikiLeaks for journalism; WikiLeaks and democracy; and debates about the organisation and its leader and public face, Julian Assange. It also whether a 'WikLeaks Effect' has wider implications for how journalism is conducted in the future, particularly the method of 'redaction' of large amounts of computational data.

Keywords:

WikiLeaks; Julian Assange; citizenship; globalisation; Internet; public sphere; international relations; journalism; democracy.

INTRODUCTION: WIKILEAKS AND PUBLIC SPHERE THEORY

The theory of the public sphere is commonly seen as one of the major contributions of media and communications theory to the social sciences. First enunciated in its most systematic early form by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas, 1989), the concept of the public sphere draws upon a historical and sociological account of the rise of liberal-capitalist institutions and the modern state in 17th and 18th century Europe. Habermas proposed that social institutions such as the mass media have played a critical role in enabling citizens to debate matters of public significance, and through such debates a rational-critical discourse can emerge through which public participation bears upon the conduct of the state, thereby better securing the relationship between the promises of liberal democracy, its potential empowerment of citizens, and the practice of public institutions.

Jostein Gripsrud (2009) has observed that Habermas's conception of the relationship of knowledge, communication and debate to notions of the good society has clear echoes in philosophies of the Enlightenment, most notably Immanuel Kant's analysis of how knowledge can enable self-emancipation of human subjects, and John Stuart Mill's defence of freedom of expression as the best means of ensuring both the accountability of governments and the protection of individual rights and freedoms. As developed by Habermas, the public sphere is something of a historically self-limiting concept. The rise of mass media, large corporations, the corporatist state, the increasingly instrumentalist and privatized use of knowledge, and the rise of 'information management' professions such as advertising and public relations, were all seen by Habermas as factors making 'focus on individuals enlightening themselves and each other while controlling government through the public use of reason was more difficult to maintain ... [as] mass organisations and mass media had thoroughly changed society and the conditions of public communication' (Gripstud, 2009: 7). Habermas referred to this as the 're-feudalisation of the public sphere', becoming a forum for the representation of power and pseudo-debates, as the real processes of decision-making became increasingly obscured from public view.

It is the critical realist element of public sphere theories that most clearly differentiate them from liberal media theories such as the 'Fourth Estate' model (Seibert, 1963). Habermas observed that the evolution of media, from small-scale newspapers and magazines to large-scale industrial conglomerates owned by those with a diverse range of interests and significant power networks, meant that the freedom of the media from state control was not the only, or possibly any longer, the primary concern in maintaining a democratic public sphere. As liberal societies are also capitalist societies, the dynamics of capitalism as they impact upon media – including concentration of ownership and control, class-based and other social inequalities, commodification, and the intertwining of economic and political power – were seen by Habermas as undermining the capacity of commercial media to realise the citizenship principles associated with 'Fourth Estate' ideals. As liberal societies are also capitalist societies, the dynamics of capitalism as they impact upon media – including concentration of ownership and control, class-based and other social inequalities, commodification, and the intertwining of economic and political power – serve to undermine the capacity of commercial media to realise the citizenship principles associated with 'Fourth Estate' ideals. At the same time, public sphere media theories have often incorporated a 'tragic' account of the relationship of media to citizenship in liberal-capitalist societies (Garnham, 1990; Dahlgren, 1995), where the public sphere appears to be consistently imperiled by the rise of commercial media interests.

Given the dialogic conception of public discourse that Habermas identifies as being central to the public sphere, it is not surprising that, as John Thompson has observed, 'Habermas was inclined to interpret the impact of newer communication media, like radio and television, in largely negative terms ... because the communication situation they created [was one] in which the reception of media products had become a form of privatised appropriation' (Thompson, 1995: 258). A number of writers identified the possibilities created by the Internet and digital media technologies to develop a *virtual public sphere*, due to features of the Internet such as: the scope for greater horizontal or peer-to-peer communication; the capacity for users to access, share and verify information from a wide range of global sources; the lack of governmental controls over the Internet as a global communication medium as

compared to more territorially based media; the ability to form virtual communities, or online communities of interest, less constrained by geography; the capacity to disseminate, debate and deliberate upon issues, and to challenge professional and official positions (Rheingold, 1994; Poster, 1997). While Habermas has himself been pessimistic about the potential for the Internet to revivify the public sphere, expressing concern about ‘the fragmentation of ... mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics’ (Habermas, 2006: 423), the potential for Internet communications to generate new forms of the public sphere and civic engagement has been widely debated, particularly when it is also acknowledged that the public sphere concept needs to be understood in the plural rather than the singular (Dahlgren, 2006; McNair, 2006; Gripstud, 2009; Breese, 2011).

If the Internet having the potential to enable a virtual public sphere constitutes the first relevant contextual factor, the intersection between media and globalization, and the question of whether a *global public sphere* may be emerging, provides the second. Giddens (2002), Tomlinson (2007) and Castells (2009) have identified global media and communication technologies as being central to contemporary globalization, which they understand to be as much a cultural phenomenon as an economic one. Manuel Castells has argued that the media today are at the epicenter of political power: ‘The media ... are not the Fourth Estate. They are much more important: they are the space of power making. The media constitute the space where power relationships are decided between competing political and social actors’ (Castells, 2009: 194). Ingrid Volkmer has argued that developments in international communication technologies, combined with the rise of global news services, ‘have established a new transnational political news sphere, which deeply transforms conventional notions of the (national) public sphere within a new transnational space’ (Volkmer, 2003: 11). Brian McNair has argued that the public sphere is shifting from a national to an increasingly global phenomenon, so that ‘the twenty-first century public sphere is much more complex and interconnected, and it is global, interacting with the local, and using ICTs to involve global publics in engaging the key issues of the time ... Politics has become globalised, and so has the means of debating it’ (McNair, 2006: 143). In the field of international political economy, the rise in the number, size and significance of non-state actors in international relations has given rise to a literature on the nature of global civil society (Lipschutz, 2005), and how the

ways in which such entities use communications media can give rise to a global public sphere (Crack, 2008).

The final element of debates about the public sphere that frames discussions here concerns the question of the *plural and contested nature of public spheres*, and the question of publics and counter-publics. There have long been a series of critiques of Habermas' claims of a unified, critical-rational public sphere having both existed historically, and being a normative ideal for a future democratic society (Fraser, 1992; Warner, 2002; McKee, 2006). Nancy Fraser argued for the need to acknowledge that 'multiple but unequal publics participate in public life' (Fraser, 1002: 128), and the resulting need to speak of *publics* and *public spheres* rather than *the public* and *the public sphere*. The concept of counterpublics was developed by Warner (2002) in relation to those in subordinate positions who organize collectively to contest dominant 'public' positions in the wider society, such as those surrounding race, gender and sexuality; McKee (2006) and Breese (2011) are among those who have used such a concept to understand the plurality of forms of media and how they critically engage with civil and political society. From a different perspective, Chantal Mouffe (2000) has critiqued Habermas for his underlying assumption that the application of principles of rationality and open debate can or should mitigate conflict in complex modern societies. Mouffe critiques the principles of deliberative democracy, instead proposing that a more equal and democratic social order should be based upon *agonistic pluralism*, whereby 'a well functioning democracy calls for a vibrant clash of democratic political positions' (Mouffe, 2000: 16). In Mouffe's account of agonistic pluralism, it:

requires providing channels through which collective passions will be given ways to express themselves over issues, which, while allowing enough possibility for identification, will not construct the opponent as an enemy but as an adversary. An important difference with the model of "deliberative democracy" is that for "agonistic pluralism", the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public, in order to render a rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs. One of the key theses of agonistic pluralism is that, far

from jeopardizing democracy, agonistic confrontation is in fact its very condition of existence (Mouffe, 2000: 16).

WIKILEAKS: A CASE STUDY IN THE GLOBAL AND VIRTUAL PUBLIC SPHERE

In many respects, the *WikiLeaks* site provides an ideal case study for considering questions about whether the twenty-first century public sphere is, or should be, more global, virtual and agonistic in its nature. Founded in 2006, and describing itself as ‘an uncensorable system for untraceable mass document leaking’ (Moss, 2010), *WikiLeaks* has carried confidential cables relating to: the treatment of detainees at the U.S. Camp Delta military base at Guantanamo Bay; the ‘bibles’ of the Church of Scientology; membership of the far-right British National Party; the 2008 Peruvian oil scandal; a 2009 accident at the Natanz nuclear facility in Iran; toxic dumping on the Ivory Coast; corruption by former Kenyan leader Daniel arap Moi; correspondence among climate scientists related to global warming; and the alleged list of web sites to be blocked by authorities in Australia, Denmark and Thailand (Wikipedia, 2011). Notionally headed by the peripatetic Australian Julian Assange, but with over 1,200 registered volunteers worldwide, *WikiLeaks* has in many ways epitomized the spirit of the global and digital counter-publics that the Internet has brought forth, and for whom the term ‘global civil society’ is too formal to truly capture their *modus operandi*. Brigid Delaney, writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, describes them in these terms:

WikiLeaks has become the story of the new, globalized, hyper-mobile age – an age in which the importance of physical place has receded, and community work, expression and politics are increasingly taking place in cyberspace.

The children of this globalized age, including Assange, are new nomads: nation-stateless, hyper-connected, international, using English as the lingua franca, travelling from place to place on cheap flights, staying on couches or in short-term sublets ...

Work in this globalised world is untethered by geography – all you need is a laptop and a Wi-Fi connection. Assange epitomizes something of the spirit of the age. He moved 37 times by the time he was 14, and seems to be at home in this wandering, homeless state – a true citizen of the world (Delaney, 2010).

WikiLeaks may have remained an interesting, if somewhat marginal, case study of interest to new media analysts and would-be Deleuzians, but for three major leaks that it undertook in 2010. In April 2010, it released classified video footage showing a 2007 U.S. Air Force strike in Baghdad, Iraq, where the pilots killed 12 unarmed people, including two Reuters employees, whose cameras were mistaken for weapons. The video, titled ‘Collateral Murder’, saw the term ‘WikiLeaks’ move from something of interest to hackers and security agencies to one of the most searched for terms on Google (Wikipedia, 2011). In July 2010, WikiLeaks released 92,000 documents related to the war in Afghanistan between 2004 and 2009, hosting them both on its own site and making them available on a selective basis to *The Guardian* in the U.K., *Der Spiegel* in Germany, and the *New York Times* in the United States. This was followed, in October 2010, by the release of around 400,000 documents relating to the Iraq war, among which were claims that the U.S. government had ignored reports of torture by the Iraqi authorities since the war began in 2003. Finally, and most famously, in November 2010 there was the release of over 250,000 diplomatic cables from 274 U.S. embassies from around the world. These were made available to, and published online by *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *Der Spiegel*, *Le Monde* in France, and *El Pais* in Spain, and a range of other publications, including the Fairfax newspapers in Australia.

It was the release of the U.S. diplomatic cables, which became known as ‘Cablegate’, that triggered a major international reaction. Among these actions were: the closing down of connections to WikiLeaks on the part of EveryDNS, Amazon, PayPal, Visa, Mastercard and the Bank of America; the issuing of an arrest warrant by the Swedish police for Assange to be extradited from the United Kingdom on sexual assault charges; accusations of terrorism or treason from various high ranking U.S. officials, including Vice-President Joe Biden, Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, and Defence

Secretary Robert Gates; calls for his assassination from U.S. political figures such as Newt Gingrich and Sarah Palin; and consideration on the part of the Australian government of laying charges of treason against Assange and the withdrawal of his Australian passport. Not surprisingly, in such a highly charged political atmosphere, Assange and WikiLeaks have also attracted many high profile supporters, including the Brazilian President Luis Inacio Lula da Silva, Prime Minister of Russia Vladimir Putin, many journalists, academics and activists and Amnesty International. Assange has also received the Sam Adams Award in the U.S., the Sydney Peace Prize in Australia, was the *Le Monde* Man of the Year in 2010, and was the Readers' Choice for *TIME Magazine's* Person of the Year in 2010.

In developing a distinctive research angle on the mountain of material and scholarship that has emerged, or is now emerging, in relation to *WikiLeaks*, we have sought to analyse its claims to being part of a new global and virtual counter-public sphere in a counter-intuitive way. Acknowledging that while Assange may claim to be a global citizen, he is nonetheless certainly an Australian one – at least in terms of the passport that he holds – we have undertaken an analysis of how WikiLeaks and Julian Assange were reported in the Australian media. We have focused on the period in which the U.S. diplomatic cables were released, from 28 November 2010, and its aftermath, up to and including the period of his appeal against the decision by English courts to allow his extradition to Sweden on sexual assault charges on 25 February, 2011. We have focused on the print/online media rather than television and radio, and on opinion and commentary pieces more than on direct news coverage. The study looked at the online coverage of WikiLeaks in the three major newspapers – *The Australian*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* – as well as commentary on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's online sites, *The Drum* and *The Drum Opinion*. In order to get a sense of differences in analysis between mainstream media and online-only sites, we also looked at the commentary about WikiLeaks on the subscription-based site *Crikey*, and on the freely available online public affairs sites *New Matilda* and *On Line Opinion*.

In developing the analysis of commentary about WikiLeaks on Australian news media sites, we sought to discern whether the author's position towards WikiLeaks, and

particularly towards the release of the U.S. diplomatic cables, was positive, neutral or negative. Our analysis came to be framed around five sets of issues:

1. The implications of WikiLeaks for the conduct of international diplomacy;
2. The response of the Gillard government in Australia to WikiLeaks;
3. What WikiLeaks might mean for the future of media, and for the future practice of journalism;
4. Whether the release of the diplomatic cables on WikiLeaks was positive from the perspective of democracy and human rights;
5. The figure of Julian Assange himself: whether he was seen as a hero or as a villain. This pointed both to issues related to the sexual assault charges in Sweden, and to the manner in which WikiLeaks has operated and Assange's role in the organization.

FAIRFAX MEDIA AND WIKILEAKS: A BOTCHED EXCLUSIVE

Before considering the overall Australian media coverage of the U.S. diplomatic cables leaked through WikiLeaks, some points can be made about the manner in which the material was released into the public domain by Fairfax through its web sites, *The Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*. In contrast to other media outlets that received the diplomatic cables, Fairfax chose not to release the cables until eight days after it had been carrying stories based on the cables, thereby denying its readers the chance to view the original source material, while ensuring that its reporter, Phillip Dorling, had several days of exclusive scoops. While in some accounts this was due to difficulties they were having in getting formal approval from the WikiLeaks organisation to release the cables (bearing in mind that it was under considerable legal and operational difficulties by this stage), the more significant factor was that of gaining commercial advantage over its rivals, as *SMH* editor-in-chief Peter Fray indicated in response to an email from the ABC's Jonathon Holmes asking why the original cables had not been made available from their web sites:

The volume of material in the Australian referenced cables means we are still mining the source documents. There are, for instance, several potential stories in each cable; to put the material online would be to give access to our competitors in the local market (quoted in Holmes, 2010).

The Fairfax approach to make the cables selectively available only after their own staff had extracted lead stories from them can be compared unfavourably to its international counterparts, such as *The Guardian*, which Fairfax has periodically sought to model its approach to online journalism upon. There are three notable problems with the approach Fairfax took to the leaked cables. First, it was clearly at odds with the spirit in which the material had been made available to mainstream media outlets by WikiLeaks, which Julian Assange described, in an op-ed piece in *The Australian* at the time of the diplomatic cables going public, as *scientific journalism*:

WikiLeaks coined a new type of journalism: scientific journalism. We work with other media outlets to bring people the news, but also to prove it is true. Scientific journalism allows you to read a news story, then to click online to see the original document it is based on. That way you can judge for yourself: Is the story true? Did the journalist report it accurately? (Assange, 2010).

Obviously, Fairfax was under no obligations to adhere to Julian Assange's scientific journalism model, and could make use of the WikiLeaks cables in any manner that they chose. But in choosing to follow the very traditional path of using unique access to information to scoop their competitors, they missed the wider significance of the leaks over and above the information contained in the cables, which is the ability to make large amounts of information available electronically to the public, with only limited filtering and redaction by news journalists and editors. To use Brian McNair's (2006) terms, Fairfax were behaving in a manner consistent with journalism in an age of information scarcity, in an environment now characterized by information abundance.

Second, the interest of Fairfax in keeping control over the information is at odds with a trend associated with other media outlets such as *The Guardian*, which has been

developing alongside the activities of WikiLeaks, to enable the readership to become the co-creators of stories. In many ways, there has been a shift from sources to data becoming the primary means of gaining new information, and while journalists have typically had exclusive access to valued sources, they do not necessarily have privileged access to large-scale data, nor are they often the people best placed to interpret it. News outlets such as *The Guardian* have been pioneering the use of *computational journalism*, most notably in the U.K. parliamentary expenses scandal, where readers were encouraged to work through the large amounts of publicly available information to identify anomalies and potential matters of public interest (Flew and Daniel, 2010). By contrast, the Fairfax approach speaks to a wider anxiety about opening up material to its readers to enable them to identify what may be the most valuable sources of information, and a wish to keep the control functions related to news securely in the hands of its own journalists.

The final point to be made was that Fairfax failed to make the release of the U.S. diplomatic cables the basis for a sustained conversation about how journalism in the 21st century would differ from that of the 20th. Their approach to handling the cables suggested that they saw no real differences, despite the very different manner in which such information had found its way to them as compared to traditional journalistic techniques. This was a lost opportunity and, again, one where Fairfax compares unfavourably to *The Guardian*. Fairfax prioritised the unique value of the information as such, rather than the wider implications of how data-driven investigative journalism derived from loose networks of people coming out of computer culture rather than that of journalism, at a time when the value of information as such is plummeting as the Internet becomes ‘the most overwhelmingly big encyclopedia that has ever existed’ (Gripstud, 2009: 15). At the end of the day, the value of revealing that Kevin Rudd’s colleagues found him to be a control freak was of limited value in December 2010, six months after those same colleagues had deposed him as the sitting Prime Minister due in part of publicly aired discontent with the same control freak tendencies.

WIKILEAKS AND THE CONDUCT OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

If we focus specifically on the release of the U.S. diplomatic cables in November 2010, much of the debate in the Australian media, as it was in media around the world, centred on the extent to which citizens have a right to expect transparency on the part of their governments in the conduct of international relations, as compared to the argument that a degree of secrecy and confidentiality is a necessary condition for the effective conduct of international diplomacy. Even in democratic political theory, an exemption to the general proposition that greater public participation and open communication between governments and their citizens is often made in the case of foreign policy. The *realist* perspective on international politics argues that disagreements about policy goals, which are institutionalized in liberal democracies around parliamentary and other forms of political competition, must be subordinated to wider questions of 'reason of state' in the international arena (Gilpin, 2002). It also implies that states must have the capacity to act independently of their citizens when required in the interests of national security, whether this involves intelligence gathering activities, confidential negotiations with other states, or even in some instances intervening directly in the affairs of other sovereign states.

This realist perspective on international relations is rejected by many, who see it as both putting power before principles, and as potentially self-defeating, as its claims to an intellectual leadership on the part of the state that is not grounded in the ideas, beliefs and moral authority of its citizenry always renders it vulnerable to charges of lacking legitimacy. Not surprisingly, Assange and his WikiLeaks colleagues completely reject a realist perspective, seeing it as proof of the cynicism and mendacity of the state and the extent to which governance and the global order, are grounded in conspiratorial and self-serving networks of elites. In his essay for *The Monthly* on Julian Assange, Robert Manne summarized the relationship between power and information in Assange's thinking in this way:

Contemporary conspiracies rely on unrestricted information flow to adapt to and control their environments. Conspirators need to be able to speak freely

to each other and to disarm resistance by spreading disinformation among the people they control, something they presently very successfully achieve. Conspirators who have control over information flow are infinitely more powerful than those who do not (Manne, 2011: 52).

While arguments of this nature have a long lineage, two factors in the 2000s have made people particularly receptive to the WikiLeaks concept of leaking as a form of counter-power, that can extract what Assange refers to as a ‘secrecy tax’ (quoted in Manne, 2011) on governments. The first is the protracted nature of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the many and varied diplomatic failures of the U.S. administration and its allies, from the fabrication of claims about there being ‘WMDs’ in Iraq, to the absurdly premature claims about ‘Mission Accomplished’ made by U.S. President George W. Bush on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln in 2003 about combat duties coming to an end in Iraq. After over a decade of conflict, and almost 10,000 casualties among the U.S. and its allies over that period, skepticism about the conduct of foreign policy by the U.S. and its allies has been at the highest level since the Vietnam War. As a general rule, those who were critical of the decisions made by governments to send troops to Iraq are the most likely to support the release of the U.S. diplomatic cables. It is by no means the case that arguments for and against WikiLeaks follow a neat left/right split – as we will show below, the pattern is considerably more complex than this – but it is certainly the case that many of Julian Assange’s most high profile supporters also tend to be those who have been longstanding critics of Western governments and their approach to international politics.

The second factor, which is a direct consequence of the 9/11 attacks on the United States and the aftermath, has been the curious way in which information secrecy has come to operate. As one of the factors seen as leading to the 9/11 attacks was a lack of information sharing among various government agencies, there has been an intensified effort to share information more widely. At the same time, the heightened concerns about security have seen more and more information being classified as confidential, and not to be circulated to the wider public. The result is an absurdly large number of information ‘insiders’, at the same time as the arguments for withholding information to the public on the grounds related to ‘national security’

have been extended far beyond what many would consider to be reasonable. Ben Eltham noted that the cache of U.S. diplomatic cables had been distributed through the U.S. government's SIPRINET (Secret Internet Router Protocol Network), which over two million U.S. government officials had access to, and which had more than 180 U.S. agencies signed up to by 2005. This has coincided with a rampant 'culture of classification', so that even relatively mundane documents are classified under Executive Order 13526 as 'confidential' or 'secret'. As Eltham observed on *New Matilda*, 'In an ironic turn that Michel Foucault would surely have applauded, the sheer amount of information now hiding behind government and corporate firewalls makes this information increasingly vulnerable to disclosure ... The wonder is that it hasn't been leaked sooner' (Eltham, 2010).

The number of critics of WikiLeaks in terms of its impact on international diplomacy has been relatively few in the Australian media. Michael Fullilove, Director of the Global Issues program at the Lowy Institute, argued at *The Drum* that the randomness with which WikiLeaks disclosed diplomatic information was disturbing, and the rationale for the dumping was incoherent, except as part of a general opposition to secrecy and closed-door diplomacy (Fullilove, 2010). Russell Trood, a Liberal Senator, critiqued the WikiLeaks philosophy as being 'grounded in a naïve conviction that complete transparency at every level will result in better government', and that 'by attempting to impose transparency by force, WikiLeaks has probably set back the cause of open government by at least 10 years' (Trood, 2010). These were certainly minority voices, however; in contrast to the United States, prosecution of Julian Assange did not become a *cause celebre* issue among political conservatives. More common were the observations along the lines of Jeff Sparrow's point, also made on *The Drum*, that 'If you're a democrat, it's a pretty basic principle: the public should know what the government does in its name' (Sparrow, 2010).

THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT REACTION TO WIKILEAKS

One reason why conservative criticism of Julian Assange and WikiLeaks was somewhat muted in Australia was the decidedly hamfisted manner in which the Gillard Labor government approached the release of the U.S. diplomatic cables. Almost immediately after the release of the cables, the Attorney-General Robert McClelland announced that the Australian Federal Police would conduct an investigation into Assange and WikiLeaks, and would fully co-operate with U.S. authorities in their criminal investigations, also indicating that Assange may have his Australian passport revoked and be arrested if he returned to Australia. Prime Minister Julia Gillard declared the release of the cables to be an 'illegal', although it was far from clear what Australian laws may have been broken. More to the point, conservative and radical critics found common cause in making the point that, as an Australian citizen, Assange had the right to expect assistance from his government when facing criminal charges in another country, regardless of whether or not the government agreed with his actions (Turnbull, 2010; Trood, 2010; Haigh and Tranter, 2010).

The over-reaction of the Gillard government served to feed the perception, made abundantly clear in the cables, of an Australian government whose members maintain uncomfortably close relations with figures in the U.S. Embassy in Australia. One of the more bizarre pieces of information revealed was that Cabinet members in the Rudd government, such as Mark Arbib, were briefing U.S. diplomats on the flaws of Rudd's leadership, and plans to organise against him. The Gillard government also scored a major political own goal in choosing the course of action that it did. Polling conducted through the online news and current affairs site *On Line Opinion* found that 65 per cent of 950 respondents approved of the WikiLeaks organization (Young, 2010). Gillard's hostile reaction to the release of the U.S. diplomatic cables received 94 per cent disapproval among Greens voters, 73 per cent disapproval among Labor voters, and 65 per cent disapproval among Liberal and National party voters.

WHAT WIKILEAKS MEANS FOR JOURNALISM?

The question of whether the activities of *WikiLeaks* are understood to be journalism has two dimensions. The first is a legal one. If the material published by *WikiLeaks* is considered to legitimately constitute news, and therefore be in the public interest to make available, then *WikiLeaks* can be considered to be a publisher, which gives it considerable protections under laws pertaining to freedom to the press. In the United States, where a case against WikiLeaks or Assange would be most likely to be pursued, the majority opinion of the U.S. Supreme Court in the *Pentagon Papers* case in 1971 reinforced earlier judgments that the *Espionage Act* and other national security legislation did not trump the freedom of expression provisions in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution unless it could be proven that ‘particular expression posed a clear and immanent danger of serious harm’ (Peters, 2011). Recognising that the journalism criteria has been critical to setting limits on the part of U.S. government agencies to prosecute the organization, *WikiLeaks* has described itself as a ‘not-for-profit media organisation’ that has adopted ‘journalism and ethical principles’; the words ‘journalism’ and ‘journalist’ appear 19 times in the ‘About’ page of *WikiLeaks* online site (Peters, 2011).

While Julian Assange has argued in some publications that ‘it is not necessary to debate whether I am a journalist’ (*Guardian*, 2010), he has also argued that *WikiLeaks* is the harbinger of a new form of ‘scientific journalism’, allowing readers access to the primary documents from which journalists make interpretations of the factual data, and that it has reinvigorated the traditions of investigative journalism associated with the Pentagon Papers and the Watergate revelations. Leading critical investigative journalists have been outspoken supporters of Assange, such as such as the London-based Australian John Pilger, and Wendy Bacon, Professor of Journalism at the Centre for Independent Journalism at the University of Technology, Sydney. In awarding Julian Assange the 2011 Martha Gelhorn Prize for Journalism, the judges observed:

WikiLeaks has been portrayed as a phenomenon of the hi-tech age, which it is. But it's much more. Its goal of justice through transparency is in the oldest and finest tradition of journalism. WikiLeaks has given the public more scoops than most journalists can imagine: a truth-telling that has empowered people all over the world. As publisher and editor, Julian Assange represents that

which journalists once prided themselves in – he’s brave, determined, independent: a true agent of people not of power (The Next Web, 2011).

In Australia, a major inhibitor of the WikiLeaks release of the U.S. diplomatic cables opening up wider debates about their implications for the future of journalism was the manner in which the Fairfax news media outlets chose to release them. By staggering the release of the cables through a series of front-page ‘scoops’, the Fairfax editors essentially approached the cables as an exercise in a very traditional form of investigative journalism. This is not to say that media outlets were opposed to what Assange had done: the editors of most major Australian newspapers signed an open letter to Prime Minister Julia Gillard, through the Walkley Foundation, opposing prosecution of Assange in Australia or the U.S., on the grounds that WikiLeaks was ‘doing what the media have always done: bringing to light material that governments would prefer to keep secret’ (MEAA, 2010).

The WikiLeaks releases raised about who and where are the investigative journalists of the 21st century, and whether, as Emily Bell from *The Guardian* put it, ‘this is the first real battleground between the political establishment and the open web ... [which] forces journalists and news organisations to demonstrate to what extent they are now part of an establishment it is their duty to report’ (Bell, 2010). Adler (2011) has observed in the U.S. context the ‘somewhat muted’ defences of WikiLeaks among organisations, representing journalists and publishers in the United States, where very general arguments for the need to protect a free press co-existed with a dislike for public advocacy on the part of journalists, opposition to Assange’s openly advocacy-driven mission, and opposition to Assange’s methods. This has echoes in Australia, where the bulk of the commentary on what WikiLeaks might mean for journalism in mainstream Australian online news media sites took place either on the ABC’s *The Drum* or outside of the mainstream news media in the new online-only media outlets.

Jonathon Holmes (2010) investigated why Fairfax had not published the diplomatic cables on which it was basing its lead stories, and found that they were not doing so for primarily commercial reasons – not to make them available to their competitors. He pointed out that ‘this is not a line of reasoning that has prevented *The Guardian*, the *New York Times*, *Der Spiegel*, *Le Monde* or any other of WikiLeaks’ collaborators

from posting cables to support their stories ... we're having to take them [Fairfax journalists] on trust, and we shouldn't have to' (Holmes, 2010). Alan Kohler, publisher of the *Business Spectator*, made the point at *The Drum* that the mission that WikiLeaks declares itself to have – 'to get the unvarnished truth out to the public' – did not apply in the Australian instance 'where it was first handed to Fairfax to be published' (Kohler, 2010). Jeff Sparrow in *The Drum* made the point that 'WikiLeaks practices outsider journalism in a time when many reporters prefer to boast about being insiders' (Sparrow, 2010) and that some of the discomfort that WikiLeaks generated among journalists was the extent to which its activities drew attention to the gaps between the crusading mission of journalism and the extent to which 'journalists accustomed to walking the corridors of power are quite likely to end up sharing the attitudes and sensibilities of those they're supposed to scrutinise' (Sparrow, 2010) – a point made by Daniel Hallin (1994), among many others.

Brian McNair drew attention to the extent that:

What we see in WikiLeaks is the result of the dissolution of boundaries which hitherto kept information secure within nation states, within governments and their agencies, secret to all but a powerful few. Digital technology and the internet have eroded those boundaries, accelerated the flow of information beyond the capacity of any institution to contain it for long, and dramatically increased its accessibility (McNair, 2010).

For McNair, the rise of WikiLeaks exemplifies a wider context of *cultural chaos*, where digital media and ubiquitous computing power are shifting the boundaries between journalism and the wider society, from a context of information scarcity to one of information abundance (McNair, 2006). It is in this context that Kohler concludes, in relation to the Fairfax strategy for a controlled release of the diplomatic cables to maximize market impact, that 'this time, the material was given to a few newspapers first so that it would make a splash; next time, or perhaps the time after that, it won't have to be' (Kohler, 2010).

WIKILEAKS AND DEMOCRACY

As a general rule, those who support the contribution of WikiLeaks to international diplomacy and as a new form of journalism will also view it as having made a positive contribution to democracy. As a general rule, such authors have typically also been highly critical of the engagement of the U.S. and its allies in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and what has been seen as complicity of major media outlets in perceived official deceptions around these conflicts. Representative examples include John Pilger in *On Line Opinion* (a piece originally published in the *New Statesman*), and Jeff Sparrow in *The Drum*:

Something has changed. Reality is no longer what the powerful say it is. Of all the spectacular revolts around the world, the most exciting is the insurrection of knowledge sparked by WikiLeaks (Pilger, 2011).

With the WikiLeaks cables, we're not discussing personal modesty. We're talking about decisions with real implications for a world we all have to live in ... however embarrassing the US spokespeople might find it, WikiLeaks's enhanced pat-down is a good thing for democracy. There's some junk that just needs to be touched (Sparrow, 2010).

It was noted earlier that debate about Assange and WikiLeaks has not been marked by a simple left/right polarity, akin to, say, the debate about the imprisonment of Australian terrorism suspect David Hicks. One counter-example would be Guy Rundle, writing in *Crikey*. Rundle distinguished between what he termed the 'WikiLeaks effect', or a generalized process of using digital media technologies to challenge power relations through the release of information into the public domain, and the developing scenario at WikiLeaks itself, where 'the very methods that WikiLeaks has had to legitimately undertake to lead the cables out, and keep them in

the public eye, has brought it at times close to being the sort of Le Carresque info deal that its very process is meant to render obsolete' (Rundle, 2010). There were also a range of criticisms of WikiLeaks that related more directly to Assange himself, and these will be considered in the next section.

At the same time, several avowed conservatives declared themselves to be WikiLeaks supporters. The former Liberal leader and current Shadow Minister for Communications, Malcolm Turnbull, cautioned that 'Governments and politicians should be careful not to make a martyr of Assange and fools of themselves' (Turnbull, 2010). The former Liberal MP Ross Cameron argued that 'Assange is forcing us to rethink our assumptions about how much protection the ordinary person needs from the truth ... the democratic project was founded on the principles of transparency and trust but has been overtaken by a culture of secrecy and spin' (Cameron, 2011). From this perspective, debating the pros and cons of WikiLeaks and Assange missed the wider point that they 'represent something much bigger ... the arrival of the internet, with its ability not just to reach a wider audience instantly, but to recruit millions of people to the task of collecting, correcting and disseminating knowledge has seen an irreversible shift and devolution in power' (Cameron, 2011). In a similar vein, *The Economist's* anonymous American blogger defended Assange against the criticism of cyberpunk luminary Bruce Sterling that Assange was an irresponsible 'crypto-utopian', arguing that 'the silver couch-surfer's philosophy appears to be some sort of mundane, mainstream democratic liberalism ... Julian Assange and his confederates have made dull liberal principles seem once again sexily subversive by exposing power's reactionary panic when a few people with a practical bent actually bother to take them seriously' (*Economist*, 2010).

Robert Manne has argued that Assange's 'cypherpunk' ideology should not be read as a variant of mainstream liberalism, but as a more radical critique of the state that identifies computer technologies as being at the centre of the contemporary information war (Manne, 2011). It is in this aspect of Assange's radicalism that led Paul Monk to compare WikiLeaks unfavourably to Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon

Papers in *The Australian*, arguing that whereas Ellsberg released the classified documents as someone who believed that the U.S. government had taken a wrong turn in relation to the Vietnam War and that it was his role to help that government learn from its mistakes, Assange's aim is to disrupt U.S. diplomacy and render the state – and other states – more dysfunctional in their ability to conduct their affairs (Monk, 2011). In these debates, there are two conflicting conceptions of the role of public information in relation to power in liberal democratic societies. One views the role of public information as being one of enabling the polity to work better, viewing societies that are more democratic as also being more effective across a number of criteria. This would be a liberal interpretation of the public sphere. The other argues that the state, the media and the corporate sector have become more and more embedded with one another, and that withholding information from the public has become central to their *modus operandi*. In this latter world-view, what is needed to challenge centralised power is what Jeff Sparrow refers to as the 'journalist as outlaw' (Sparrow, 2010). Chris Berg argued that WikiLeaks walks both sides of this fence: it aims both to be a repository of data and documents, providing a safe haven for whistleblowers, and it has an activist agenda in relation to particular campaigns, such as pushing for the exit of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and Iraq (Berg, 2010).

A very interesting exploration of this dichotomy is in an essay by Slavoj Žižek, "The Truth Shall Set You Free, But Not This Truth" published at (of all places!) the ABC's Religion and Ethics site. In this essay, Žižek argues that WikiLeaks is caught between 'the radical act of publishing secret state documents', and its recuperation as 'another chapter in the glorious history of the struggle for the "free flow of information" and the "citizens' right to know"'. In the latter instance it runs the risk of becoming little more than; a radical case of "investigative journalism", and a project akin to that depicted in Hollywood films such as *All the President's Men*, where 'corruption is shown to reach the very top, yet the ideology of such works resides in their optimistic final message: What a great country ours must be, when a couple of ordinary people can bring down the President of the United States' (Žižek, 2011). Žižek's argument is similar to that of Guy Rundle: to the extent that WikiLeaks comes to represent something more than a 'sort of mundane, mainstream democratic liberalism', it needs to articulate its radical informational project to social movements seeking change in other spheres of public life.

JULIAN ASSANGE AND THE ‘ASSANGE EFFECT’

There is little doubt that debate about WikiLeaks in the wake of the release of the U.S. diplomatic cables came to be framed around its founder, the Australian-born Julian Assange. Assange has perhaps become the most famous Australian to feature as a news media publisher since Rupert Murdoch, being the public face and official spokesperson for WikiLeaks. The question posed by Mark Pesce of ‘Why does WikiLeaks *need* a public face?’, as it is essentially a dropbox service that provides anonymity to whistleblowers, became particularly relevant when Assange was arrested in London, not on espionage charges, but in relation to allegations of sexual assault relating to prior sexual encounters in Sweden. This in turn brought a range of other factors into play in discussions about WikiLeaks, including: the conduct of the Swedish prosecutor’s office in pursuing the case; whether any collusion had occurred between the Swedish investigators and other authorities, notably those of the U.S.; the comparatively broad reach of sexual assault laws in Sweden as compared to other jurisdictions; and allegations that Assange’s supporters were deliberately downplaying the significance of these charges and smearing the women who had accused Assange of sexual assault (Dalton, 2010; Brull, 2011). The debate on WikiLeaks and the sexual assault charges against Assange on the Australian left blog *Larvatus Prodeo* gives a good flavor of different takes on these issues: it is again notable that a site such as *Larvatus Prodeo* would be expected to support WikiLeaks if the question involved a straightforward divide between supporters and critics of the uses of state power.

The attention given to Assange has allowed critics to point to double standards between WikiLeaks’ demands for total transparency in the conduct of international relations and the secretive nature of its own operations and allegations about the autocratic behavior of his founder. There is the well-known response of Assange to one of his colleagues who questioned his decision to suspend the organisation’s German spokesperson, Daniel Domscheit-Berg (who since set up his own rival organisation, OpenLeaks):

I am the heart and soul of this organization, its founder, philosopher, spokesperson, original coder, organizer, financier and all the rest. If you have a problem with me, piss off (quoted in Poulsen and Zetter, 2010).

With a plethora of books now coming out or about to be released concerning WikiLeaks, these issues will be rehearsed in the public domain many times. This will be even more the case of Assange writes an autobiography as he is indicating he might do, or if a Hollywood movie is made about WikiLeaks, as also appears possible. The question of the lack of internal transparency of WikiLeaks is contextualised in an interesting way by Geert Lovink and Patrice Riemens (2011), who observe that it is a classic example of what they refer to as a Single Person Organisation (SPO) based upon charismatic leadership. They argue that ‘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’ (Lovink and Riemens, 2010).

The other defining feature of Assange and his colleagues is their roots in computer hacking cultures, a point also discussed by Pesce (2010) and Manne (2011). They note the interesting affinity between hackers and security agencies: the former present themselves as the sworn enemies of the latter, but the relationship between the two is akin to that of the old *Mad* magazine “Spy vs. Spy” comics, where the opponent is beaten using methods that render the victor indistinguishable from their foe. Lovink and Riemens observe that:

WikiLeaks is ... 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 ... 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 (Lovink and Riemens, 2010).

While pointing to limitation in WikiLeaks as it has emerged thus far, Lovink and Riemens conclude with the observation that what can be termed the ‘WikiLeaks Effect’, or the ‘Assange Effect’ is here to stay, since ‘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 ... 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’ (Lovink and Riemens, 2010).

CONCLUSION

This paper has drawn upon debates about the theory of the public sphere and its relationship to political society to provide a framework through which to evaluate the significance of WikiLeaks in general, and its release of over 250,000 U.S. diplomatic cables in November 2010 in particular. In outlining Jürgen Habermas’s original conception of the public sphere, it was noted that three debates that have arisen have been: whether the Internet is enabling the development of virtual public spheres; whether public spheres increasingly operate on a global rather than a national basis; and whether we need to speak in terms of plural and contested public spheres and agonistic politics rather than a unified and critical-rational public sphere. In all of these instances, WikiLeaks provides a particularly interesting and important case study.

Our case study approach was somewhat counter-intuitive in that we focused upon reactions to the WikiLeaks release of the U.S. diplomatic cables in the Australian media. While noting the claims made for WikiLeaks as a precursor to a global and virtual counter-public sphere, we drew upon the fact that its founder Julian Assange is an Australian – perhaps the most famous Australian in the global news media business since Rupert Murdoch – to consider whether there were distinctive elements

of the Australian coverage of the events. We drew upon the online news sites of major Australian newspapers as well as on online-only sites, and our focus was on opinion and commentary rather than straight news reportage. We framed the discussion around five issues: WikiLeaks and international diplomacy; the Australian government's reaction to the cable release; implications of WikiLeaks for journalism; WikiLeaks and democracy; and debates about the organisation and its leader and public face, Julian Assange.

One feature of the Australian reaction was that there was little in the way of calls for punitive action against Assange in the media, even among political conservatives. Indeed, the call on the part of the Gillard Labor government for criminal action to be pursued against Assange and WikiLeaks seems to have generated views across the political spectrum that, regardless of debates about the merits of the actions taken, Assange warranted appropriate forms of support and protection as an Australian citizen. Moreover, in so far as WikiLeaks provides a securely encrypted framework for large-scale whistleblowing through the leaking of large amounts of digital data, there will be a lot more of such activities in the near future: we can speak of a 'WikiLeaks Effect' or an 'Assange Effect' in information counter-flows that exists almost independently of the nature of the person or organization that chooses to pursue such avenues.

Where opinions differ significantly is in relation to whether the actions of WikiLeaks can be seen as what *The Economist* referred to as 'mundane, mainstream democratic liberalism', and hence within longstanding traditions of whistleblowing and investigative journalism that any person committed to liberal democracy could support in principle, or whether it points towards new kinds of radical informational project and oppositional counter-publics. Interestingly, it is those taking the latter view, such as Guy Rundle in *Crikey*, who have tended to be most critical of Assange, arguing that a cult of secrecy within WikiLeaks with its roots in hacker subcultures acts as a barrier to connecting up the WikiLeaks project to social movements seeking change in other spheres of public life and politics. At the same time, it would also be noted that the strongest supporters of Assange and WikiLeaks have also come from the non-mainstream mediasphere, and from those with a reputation for left-critical

journalism such as John Pilger. Wendy Bacon, Antony Loewenstein and Jeff Sparrow.

The question of a ‘WikiLeaks Effect’ seems particularly interesting to consider in light of the manner in which stories arising from the release of the U.S. diplomatic cables was handled by the Fairfax media outlets, which had exclusive first rights to them. In sharp contrast to equivalent overseas news organisations such as *The Guardian* in the U.K. and the *New York Times* in the U.S., Fairfax chose not to release the cables in their original form, but rather to selectively release information in the forms of a small number of daily ‘exclusives’, based upon the analysis of their own staff about the newsworthiness of individual cables. Fairfax approached the cables as if it still had a meaningful monopoly of information in relation to their content, and on the basis that it was the content of the cables themselves that was the primary source of news value. Its news outlets were essentially non-participants in the wider debates surrounding WikiLeaks itself, and the range of implications that the release of the cables had not only for areas obviously related to their content, such as international diplomacy, but for the nature of news and journalism itself in the 21st century. As a result, it was on the newer online news media sites, including the ABC’s *The Drum* site as well as the online-only sites, where the liveliest debates about the wider implications of WikiLeaks were taking place in the Australian news media.

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