Transparency as Cult
WikiLeaks and Facebook

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In the light of a critical examination of today's transparency ideologies, comparing Facebook and WikiLeaks with each other in a basic manner is surprisingly clarifying. At first, this might seem inappropriate, because of the apparently fundamentally different premises and divergent social, economic and political views of these super-topical digital platforms: Facebook as an ultra-capitalistic billion-dollar company versus WikiLeaks as an activist, non-profit organization; Facebook as a social network for the exchange of personal information versus WikiLeaks as a whistle-blower site for anonymous revelations of public interest; Facebook as commercial purloiner and trader of information versus WikiLeaks as altruistic provider of information.

There are also many similarities, however: both Facebook and WikiLeaks are to a large degree products of an increased societal desire for disclosure. Both seek their societal legitimization in the philosophy (or doctrine) of transparency and the sharing of information, and on the basis of that, both preach a better world – whereby 'Julian Assange sees the world as filled with real and imagined enemies; Zuckerberg sees the world as filled with potential friends', as *Time Magazine* once put it. In their fanatical creed of transparency, both organizations have also been accused of serious violations of people's privacy (despite WikiLeaks' position that transparency is something for government and not for individuals), while both Zuckerberg and Assange seem to actually encourage a certain mystification as regards their own person. Last but not least, both claim a significant role as stoker of the revolutions in the Middle East. In that regard, however, Assange, who considers WikiLeaks a check on power, called Facebook an 'appalling spy machine' for the American government and its intelligence services. Zuckerberg, on the other hand, does see ideological similarities 'somewhere': 'At a higher level some of the themes may be connected.'

Be that as it may, somewhere in the shining clarity of radical transparency there is an acute black hole, a dark spot where Facebook and WikiLeaks meet. The question is: At that frightful point of convergence, what happens with the first resumed differences? Are they confirmed after a fleeting contact, so that a process of semantic and ideological divergence can immediately resume, or might it be revealed that these podiums indeed both are a special kind of 'service', proceeding from their dedication to transparency? And then here the word 'service' is also meant in the sense of 'celebration' or 'cult'. But who or what is being served, and if this is a cult, what is being worshiped or celebrated?

At first sight, of course, this seems to be a cult of visibility, whereby Facebook and WikiLeaks, in their craving for universality, complement one another as counterparts: the former involves the 'community' in the celebration and the latter its institutes; both must be transparent. In this immense transparent bliss, the communal is then celebrated and claimed, as one big discourse and a democratic exchange, whereby an immaterial, intangible service is provided to the *populus*, a service that it carries out itself, as a higher specimen of Do-It-Yourself. DIY in the sense that it is the 'populist body' itself that produces (by sharing and by publishing) the experience of transparency and *communis*,

which it then digests and consumes.

So in fact, the communal is also what is 'drawn up' and offered in this cult, and what disappears into the all-absorbing black hole of hyper-transparency. And so this concerns a service to visibility and openness just as much as to secrecy. The core of the communal and public can thus never be situated purely in the visible and transparent, but is equally present in the hidden and opaque. (In this light, it is understandable that the central focus in the new reality programmes, such as *Secret Story,* is on keeping a secret, instead of exacting extreme transparency from the participants.)

Thus the contrived search for a point of convergence between Facebook and WikiLeaks as a small thought experiment at any rate results in the realization that, despite their differing ideologies and objectives, the paradigms underlying these two organizations are not essentially different. On the contrary, it is precisely together that they manifest the dominant paradigm to which the demand for transparency belongs *in optima forma*. They equally well demonstrate together, as counterparts of one another, that the philosophy of transparency and its logistic or performative system not only makes the communal visible but also makes it evaporate and lets it escape.

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Tags

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