Transparency

Know It All

WikiLeaks, Democracy and the Information Age

Jodi Dean

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According to American political theorist Jodi Dean, WikiLeaks' Julian Assange lacks insight into the setting in which he operates. In communicative capitalism, the whole concept of the relation between openness and democracy radically changed. Not only does Assange assume that reliable, symbolically effective information is the basis of democracy, he also does not recognize that information overkill is a greater handicap than too little information, and that he himself is part of the spectacle that is diverting attention from political issues.

Introducing her extensively mediated (live audience of 1,800 people, live web stream, Facebook and Twitter updates, radio broadcast, print coverage) two-hour long conversation with Julian Assange and Slavoj Žižek, Amy Goodman, host of the US radio program, 'Democracy Now! *[en.wikipedia.org - Democracy Now! is a United States daily progressive, nonprofit, independently syndicated program of news, analysis, and opinion, aired by more than 1000 radio, television, satellite and cable TV networks in North America. The award-winning one-hour War and Peace Report is hosted by investigative journalists Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez. The program is funded entirely through contributions from listeners, viewers, and foundations, and does not accept advertisers, corporate underwriting, or government funding.]*, asserted that 'information is power' and 'information is a matter of life and death'.[1] She illustrated her point by linking two instances of a US Apache helicopter in Iraq firing on seemingly innocent people. The first occurred in February 2007 when a helicopter with the call sign 'Crazy Horse' fired on men raising their arms in surrender. An account of the incident appeared among the 400,000 documents released by WikiLeaks as the Iraq War Logs late in the summer of 2010. The second event took placed in July 2007 when a helicopter with the same call sign fired on an unarmed group, killing two journalists and wounding some children. WikiLeaks released video shots from the helicopter gun-sight under the title 'Collateral Murder' in April 2010.[2] Goodman concluded: 'Now, I dare say that if we had seen what came out in the Iraq War Logs in February of 2007, if we had learned the story at the time, after it happened, of the men with their hands up trying to surrender, there would have been an outcry. People are good. People care. People are compassionate. They would have called for an investigation. Perhaps one would have begun. But it might well have saved the lives of so many. Certainly, months later, perhaps that same Apache helicopter unit under investigation would not have done what it did. And maybe Namir Noor-Eldeen, the young Reuters videographer, and his driver Saeed Chmagh, not to mention the other men who were killed and the kids critically injured, none of that would have happened to them. That's why information matters. It is important we know what is done in our name. And today we're going to talk about this new age of information.'

For Goodman, information is so powerful that its very presence generates consensus, conviction and action without doubt or ambiguity. Despite the deep divisions in the USA and throughout the world with respect to US militarism, the war in Iraq and the so-called war on terror, and regardless of the way these divisions manifest themselves in multiple media outlets, and notwithstanding US Americans' overall deep mistrust of media, information about the first event is ostensibly so clear and unambiguous that it could 'certainly' save lives (well, 'maybe', 'perhaps'). This is a strange claim for our contemporary setting. Images of torture and official acknowledgment of torture have not resulted in any serious investigations, trials, reprimands or sentencing of key officials. The leaked videos themselves were met with questioning and disagreement. Ultimately, they were displaced from view by more intense focus on the one man behind their release and circulation, Assange.

At least three suppositions underlie Goodman's conviction. The first is that information is immediate and efficient. Information can be transmitted from one location to another with no decay of meaning, no noise, no distortion. The second supposition is that of an underlying trust. Those who receive the information believe it and understand its significance. They are not sceptical, cynical or malevolent – *people are good, people are compassionate, people care*. The third is that the relation between knowledge and action is obvious and direct. In Socratic terms, 'to know the good is to do the good'. Information is the knowledge necessary for action, the missing link between acquiescence and resistance, passive acceptance and active work to change the world. The basic matrix for Goodman's conviction, then, is democratic. She assumes that secrets withheld from the people are barriers to their exercise of political power. And, conversely, the secrets people (whether as individuals, corporations or shadowy associations of hackers) withhold from

governments likewise constitute barriers to state power. Secrets contain the information needed to act. It thus bears emphasizing that the democratic matrix is also the matrix of conspiracy theory. Insofar as the secret is the locus of a missing legitimacy, a hidden crime or corruption that, once revealed, can be weeded out and rightful authority restored, the conspiracy theorist pursues the same endeavour as the democrat. Both are suspicious of what they see and want to get to the real truth – one of the reasons that Jeremy Bentham defended publicity as a system of distrust. [3]

Goodman's suppositions do not hold under communicative capitalism. Despite her gesture to 'this new age of information', Goodman doesn't acknowledge what is new about this age, that is, what abundant contributions to a rapidly circulating flow of intensities entail for the effectiveness of any particular contribution. [4] Communicative capitalism is characterized by the decline of symbolic efficiency. As theorized by Slavoj Žižek, the decline of symbolic efficiency points to the failure of symbols and messages to produce expected responses, that is, to a fundamental uncertainty regarding what they mean or whether they are reliable. [5] There are always other possibilities. What is obvious to some is unclear or suspicious to others. Indeed, there is no stopping point at which to resolve the uncertainties; reflexivity goes all the way down. The very conditions of possibility for adequation are missing. Images and affects rush in to fill the gap – does someone appear trustworthy? How did she seem? Did she seem believable or was something a little off? The ability to falsify is unlimited. The lack of a capacity to know is the other side of the abundance of knowledge. It's no surprise, then, that the decline of symbolic efficiency is accompanied by a decline in a sense of the capacity for action. Because we can never be certain, we always need more information. The implication of the decline of symbolic efficiency is thus that secrets don't contain the information needed to act. They are just tags like any other, except with a bit more intensity attached – we want to know, but after we do, we move on to something else.

The administration of George W. Bush was well-adapted to the media environment of communicative capitalism. To deal with the home front of the Iraq war, it groomed former generals into talking heads. Not only did these 'military analysts' advocate war and parrot administration talking points, many were also tied to the defence industry as executives, consultants and board members. According to *The New York Times*: 'Internal Pentagon documents repeatedly refer to the military analysts as "message force multipliers" or "surrogates" who could be counted on to deliver administration "themes and messages" to millions of Americans "in the form of their own opinions".' [6]

The term 'message force multipliers' can be accented in at least two ways: the force multiplication of messages or the multiplication of message forces. [7] Force multiplication indexes a communications strategy for a complex media environment. It implies adding lots of forces, putting more people on the ground or on the air, just as one would send more troops into a situation. 'Multiplication of message forces' indicates a concrete awareness of the affective dimension of media in communicative capitalism. The Bush administration excelled in excepting itself from the signifying aspect of language and relying instead on affective prompts. It absorbed the lesson from advertising and pop music: repetition exerts a force, a compulsion; repetition has effects independent of the meaning of what is repeated. Repetition itself has an affective impact – a sexualizing pulsation, a threatening intrusion, a hilarious extreme. State politics in the twenty-first century in the USA, UK and Europe has become ever more adept at tying together previously stable meanings in ways that rely on and at the same time disrupt these meanings. This combination of reliance and disruption generates affective responses from the tension accompanying the combustion of meaning and non-meaning.

The combination also suggests a tactical appreciation for contemporary short attention spans. With multiple message forces, one can keep a message alive on one terrain even as

it dwindles in another – a role at which blogs excel. Dead issues can reanimate: mainstream journalists report, 'bloggers are debating' or 'as was recently uncovered by blog X'. The idea of multiplying message forces highlights how messages carry affective charges. The communications strategy on which it is based doesn't turn on 'getting our message out there', as if there were to be a debate on positions that need to be understood and considered. Rather, the goal is spreading, diversifying and intensifying the message force. Abundant, dispersed, mashed up messages displace previous communication strategies focused on direct image control. Even when facts are corrected, fictions remain, repeated and circulated in affective networks. In this setting, disclosures add to the noise rather than matter as content on their own. Anything can be packaged as a secret: it's whatever I didn't know. Anything can be disclosed as a secret. Since so much circulates through the networks of communicative capitalism, previously revealed information can be presented in a new context, with a new spin, with new links, thereby becoming a new revelation.

As Tiziana Terranova expresses it, ours is an informational culture where 'meaningful experiences are under siege, continuously undermined by a proliferation of signs that have no reference, only statistical patterns of frequency, redundancy and resonance (the obsessive frequency and redundancy of an advertising campaign, the mutually reinforcing resonance of self-help manuals and expert advice, the incessant bombardment of signifying influences)'. [8] Does Assange agree? He initially seems to. In his exchange with Goodman and Žižek, he emphasized numbers, the numbers of documents and the statistical analyses they enable. As did nearly every report on the Iraq War Logs, he announced that there were approximately 400,000 documents, that they constituted the largest stash of war documents ever published, that they provided details on over 104,000 deaths. This accentuation of the numerical attributes of the archive he's produced implies a kind of mathematical authority. Under communicative capitalism, however, an excess of polls, surveys and assessments circulates, undercutting not only the efficacy of any particular finding but the conditions of possibility for knowledge and credibility as such. There is always another analysis, done by another group or association with whatever bias and whatever methodology, displacing whatever information one thought one had. Assange also seems to think that this mathematical authority approaches something like completeness, that it can encompass the entirety of human experience, and thus provide the information that Goodman thinks is necessary for democracy. Assange explained: 'What advances us as a civilization is the entirety of our intellectual record and the entirety of our understanding about what we are going through, what human institutions are actually like and how they actually behave. And if we are to make rational policy decisions, insofar as any decision can be rational, then we have to have information that is drawn from the real world, in a description of the real world. And at the moment, we are severely lacking in the information from the interior of big secretive organizations that have such a role in shaping how civilization evolves and how we all live.'

Assange clearly shares Goodman's democratic matrix. Like her, he presupposes the possibility of undistorted, trustworthy, symbolically efficient information. Like her, he speaks as if there were no fundamental divisions or antagonism rupturing the 'public' of those who would come to know this information. Indeed, for him there is one civilization, with one record, that can be understood in its entirety. Like Goodman, Assange assumes that the withholding of such information is the barrier, the barrier that matters, to 'rational policy decision' – there are no fundamental disagreements, no class conflicts, no divisions constitutive of society as such.

Even though Assange's basic assumptions are wrong, the more interesting problem is his misunderstanding of the setting in which he operates. In presuming a closed entirety of information he fails to account for his own intervention in the communicative circuits; that is, he fails to acknowledge the fundamental reflexivity of communication. The

repercussion is that he doesn't consider the amplification effects accompanying increases in the amount of information. So not only are there hundreds of thousands of new documents, analyses of these documents, reports based on these documents, and analyses and traces left whenever anyone or anything accesses the reports, documents and analyses, but there is also more commentary, more comments on the commentary, more debates on the documents, analyses, reports, commentary, and comments, and so on. This amplification thus adds to the noise of the overall environment, making it ever more difficult to focus on or access any particular item of informational content, much less understand it or galvanize activism on its basis. In adopting a conspiracy-minded conception of state power, Assange fails to grasp what the Bush administration already knew: that power in communicative capitalism relies on abundance, overkill and repetition, on the excess of information, on the way that too much information is more incapacitating than too little information (even as it enhances the feeling that there is never enough). The power of information doesn't come knowing it all; it comes from the destruction of the possibility of an all. To be clear, I am not saying that the Bush administration did not have all sorts of secrets, all sorts of information that it wanted to withhold. Rather, I am saying that the disclosure of any particular element of it, in the media setting of communicative capitalism, cannot have the sorts of political effects Assange and Goodman presume.

Guy Debord*Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, published 20 years after *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord offers the notion of the 'integrated spectacle' as the highest stage of the spectacular society. Although he doesn't describe the integrated spectacle as a reflexive circuit, reflexivity is its primary conceptual innovation. Debord writes, 'For the final sense of the integrated spectacle is this – that it has integrated itself into reality to the same extent as it was describing it, and that it was reconstructing it as it was describing it. As a result, this reality no longer confronts the integrated spectacle as something alien.' **9** The integrated spectacle is an element of the world it depicts; it is part of the scene upon which it looks. When he appeals to the entirety of our understanding of what institutions are actually like, Assange neglects his place in the circuit. Differently put, he positions himself as somehow outside the system he is part of, as if it were not reflexive. This is a serious omission: since the publication of the Iraq War Logs, Assange has become the star of his own story, the centre of spectacle garnering more attention than any specific instances of 'collateral murder' in Iraq. To this extent, he displaces attention from the very political issues to which he is ostensibly trying to bring attention.

Debord misses the reflexive circuitry of the integrated spectacle because his account of the spectacle is embedded in a model of broadcast media. This is an error Assange makes as well, even as the digital networks Assange puts to use should suggest otherwise. His publication strategy relies on arranging for major media providers (over 80 different outlets, including major newspapers like *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, and *Der Spiegel*) to disclose the information that has been revealed to and authenticated by WikiLeaks. Assange calls this 'co-opting' or 'leveraging' the mainstream press. The strategy makes sense for newspapers that have cut back their reporting staffs. In effect, WikiLeaks lets them outsource the journalistic work of investigative research.[10] Yet in a setting of widespread mistrust of media, it's difficult to see how Assange's content differs from other content published by the papers. Why should it be exempt from the broader scepticism towards everything else they produce? Recall, the decline of symbolic efficiency means that there is no decisive point of certainty, no shared criteria providing sure guarantees. So who is co-opting whom? Is the media co-opting Assange for free content? Is he leveraging them for more exposure? Or are they both dupes in a more complex exercise in disinformation where the CIA and the Mossad are manipulating their eagerness and credulity? Reports to this effect circulated on the Internet as early as March 2010, alleging that Asian intelligence sources believed WikiLeaks to be part of a cyber-COINTEL program: 'WikiLeaks is running a disinformation campaign, crying persecution by US intelligence – when it is US intelligence itself.' [11]

At any rate, both Debord and Assange proceed as if the primary informational problem was a matter of top-down control. Debord worries that the images spectators see are 'chosen and constructed by *someone else*' [12] When 'chosen by someone else' is the problem, the solution seems like it can be found in choosing and constructing for oneself – one of the primary tenets of the hacker ethic inspiring Assange's development of WikiLeaks. Any opposition to state power appears radical, revolutionary – as if there weren't capitalists and right-wingers constantly contesting and seeking to limit the reach of state power. Assange relies on this radical aura as he positions himself as the single individual fighting *mano-a-mano* against mighty states.

Debord treats the spectacle as a form of state power insofar as the spectacle is a vehicle for control. Of course, constant, pervasive communication can also be a regime of control. That people willingly and happily disclose their views, activities, associations, and locations not only makes surveillance a lot easier but also distributes it – we stalk our friends in participatory, self-organized, control networks. Under communicative capitalism, our spectacles are the ones we make ourselves, the ones that go viral. Corporate and state power need not go to the expense and trouble to keep people entertained, passive and diverted. They can outsource that to us under the guise of power-sharing and DIY. We do it ourselves.

Assange, though, perceives contemporary governance as authoritarian because it relies on secrets, integrating members into a shared conspiracy. His view resonates here with Debord's claim that 'generalized secrecy stands behind the spectacle, as the decisive complement of all it displays and, in the last analysis its most vital operation'[13] In writings from 2006, Assange treats conspiracy as a mode of governance, arguing that secrets form the heart of authoritarian power. He writes: 'Since unjust systems, by their nature induce opponents, and in many places barely have the upper hand, mass leaking leaves them exquisitely vulnerable to those who seek to replace them with more open forms of governance.' [14] Assange does not consider that open forms of governance can also be unjust, that revelation, data-dumping and message force multipliers can and do serve as tactics in networked information war. More information can entail more diversion from central lines of antagonism, more dispersion of political energies.

The conviction that power requires secrecy may also explain Assange's own penchant for

secrecy. As Geert Lovink and Patrice Riemans point out, Assange defends the lack of transparency in the WikiLeaks organization by saying that it 'needs to be completely opaque in order to force others to be totally transparent'[15] Despite the apparent irony of a secret organization fighting for more open governance, Assange remains firmly within the democratic matrix. Because he thinks of conspiracy as the mode of governance in authoritarian regimes, he views revelation and concealment as primary tactics in political struggle. Yet insofar as he fails to look beyond the democratic matrix, he misses the changes in their operation. Because communicative capitalism's media setting is open, distributive, recombinant and chaotic, revelation is much less effective than repetition and much less disruptive than tactics that focus on political goals beyond media exposure.

I conclude by turning to remarks by the third participant in the discussion, Žižek. Pointing out that much of the content that WikiLeaks leaks is already known, Žižek argued that WikiLeaks is nonetheless a radical threat to the formal functioning of power. He explained that: 'The real disturbance was at the level of appearances: we can no longer pretend we don't know what everyone knows we know. This is the paradox of public space: even if everyone knows an unpleasant fact, saying it in public changes everything.' The problem with Žižek's point is that 'saying' had already occurred. In other words, Žižek begins with the concession that much of what was reported was not new; it was already known. This means that it had already been reported, already been said, and yet this saying didn't disturb the level of appearances at all. And the reason it didn't disturb the level of appearances is that this level doesn't exist. The decline of symbolic efficiency means that there isn't a public sphere of accepted truths and rules of the game. On the contrary, as the Bush administration's tactics in info-war already make clear, the milieu of communicative capitalism is fragmented, uneven, reflective and dispersed.

Now one might rightfully object that if my analysis here is correct why is Bradley Manning in prison? Doesn't that suggest that WikiLeaks threatens state power? It seems to me that it's Manning and other leakers who present threats to power. But this isn't new: soldiers who violate military rules always face severe charges. Those who reveal state secrets are already treated severely. Could it be, then, that WikiLeaks threatens the structure of power by arming and protecting leakers, by given them opportunities to share previously secret information that before they would have been unable to distribute even if they wanted to? Only if one assumes that secrecy is the heart of power. If, however, one recognizes the changed media setting of communicative capitalism, one that thrives on the multiplication and replication and circulation of information and commentary in fast, ubiquitous networks that distract and disperse us, then WikiLeaks is just another spectacular hub.

In his *London Review of Books* piece on WikiLeaks, Žižek writes: 'The aim of the WikiLeaks revelations was not just to embarrass those in power but to lead us to mobilize ourselves to bring about a different functioning of power that might reach beyond the limits of representative democracy.'[16] If Žižek is right, then WikiLeaks aimed to incite action, widespread action, outside and against the US government. Instead, WikiLeaks displaced the little focused opposition to the war that remained back onto itself. Rather than mobilizing people, WikiLeaks offers Assange as a surrogate into which we can invest our fantasies of action… before we click on some other links and watch some other videos on YouTube.

Jodi Dean is the author of numerous books and articles. Her books include *Solidarity of Strangers* (1996), *Aliens in America* (1998), *Publicity's Secret* (2002), *Žižek's Politics* (2006), *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* (2009), *Blog Theory* (2010) and *The Communist Horizon* (2012). Her most recent book is *Crowds and Party,* published by Verso in 2016.

Footnotes

1. For the lecture, photos and a clip from the video, see www.dowethics.com.
2. Available at www.collateralmurder.com.
3. For a detailed account of secrecy, conspiracy and democracy, see Jodi Dean, *Publicity's Secret* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).
4. For a more detailed account of communicative capitalism, see Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).
5. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* (Londen: Verso, 1999), p. 326.
6. David Barstow, 'Behind TV Analysts, Pentagon's Hidden Hand', *The New York Times* (20 April 2008). Available at www.nytimes.com.
7. The following discussion summarizes an argument I develop in more detail in *Blog Theory* (Cambridge, UK: 2010).
8. Tiziana Terranova, *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age* (New York: Pluto Press, 2005), 14.
9. Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie (London: Verso, 1998), 9.
10. For a more detailed account of these changes, see Felix Stalder, 'Contain This!'. First published in *Metamute* (29 November 2010). Available at www.eurozine.com.
11. 'Is WikiLeaks a Mossad/CIA Front?', posted to Kenny's Sideshow (31 March 2010). Available at kennysideshow.blogspot.com.
12. Debord, *Comments*, op. cit. (note 9), 27.
13. Ibid., 12.
14. Julian Assange, 'The non-linear effects of leaks on unjust systems of governance', posted to the iq.org (31 December 2006). Available at web.archive.org.
15. Geert Lovink and Patrice Riemans, 'Twelve Theses on WikiLeaks', *Eurozine* (7 December 2010). Available at www.eurozine.com.
16. Slavoj Žižek, 'Good Manners in the Age of WikiLeaks', London Review of Books vol. 33, no. 2 (20 January 2011), 9-10.

Crosslinks

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