

Appraising Wikileaks Through the Prism of Theory

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Traditional agents of high politics have been quick to pass the verdict. To arch-hawk Hilary Clinton, the crypto-journalism organisation WikiLeaks is a "hostile intelligence agency." She has famously attributed its power to disrupt US diplomacy to an unholy alliance with Russia, a smear that has got stuck in the public consciousness.

Evidently though, this is a flawed, biased narrative. It fundamentally derives from Machiavellian Weltpolitik (imperialist foreign policy) strategies, methods of imposing power that seek to preserve imperial rule, ones which are the reason d'état of the life of a sordid and evil Washington power nexus.

This article proposes a more objective and realistic perspective informed by academia, but delivered as a polemic. Broadly, Wikileaks functions by facilitating a public forum in the global community by means of technological innovations, one which brings in a range of repressed local perspectives. Typically, Wikileaks initiates intense public discourse on wrongfully suppressed political issues, a discourse that draws on the diverse data, views, knowledge and experiences made available by their documents.

Through its process of spreading information, Wikileaks becomes a catalyst for a broader process which stimulates engagement between the public and decision makers through lively dissent. The outcome is that people are empowered to stand up for their beliefs and push hitherto invisible issues, none in the public interest, on the agenda.

The real ingenuity of Wikileaks consists in the way its publishing model inverts the power relations in the political economy of contemporary media. The institutions governing traditional media are basically corrupt cartels, vast, nefarious conglomerates in which there is a chain of command, moving downward, from paymasters to editors, and downwards again from editors to the roster of journalists/hacks.

This dynamic is galvanised by a perverse economic incentive to produce work that satisfies the proprietors. By contrast Wikileaks' supply of content is generated from the bottom up, a

reaction to demand from whistleblowers. Wikileaks' commissioning model sources journalism from, by and for the public.

While its participants are geographically disparate and its interaction's spanning borders, Wikileaks nonetheless could be said to constitute a Mini-Public, that is, a new form of governance to reform democracy being studied and developed by academics. The theoretical approach best placed to explain the democratic role of Wikileaks is Agonistic Pluralism.

This is an agent of conflict and antagonism against the high state. In so doing, it pursues multiplicity in political narratives and information for citizens who undertake "low" grassroots politics, often dispossessed of the real facts, dispossessed purposefully by parties to the establishment.

A Mini-public is an innovation in democratic practice insofar as it increases democratic efficiency by deferring power to citizens to play key roles in decision-making. This is done via moderated discussions. A report, "[Minipublics: Examples And Resources](#)", published on NewDemocracy, an independent research organization, states the following:

"Mini-publics also provide an opportunity to build capacity in the Parliament by utilising external knowledge and skills. They complement and inform the decision making process but, crucially, do not replace the decision taking responsibility of members. This approach is in keeping with the Parliament's founding principles.

"We consider deliberative approaches would be well suited to bill scrutiny or to examining issues where it is important to understand the public's views on a complex moral or social issue. They could be used as part of an inquiry into an issue where public opinion is divided. The mini public report would demonstrate to the committee what happens when people with different views are invited to deliberate and report their conclusions."

Problems of Contemporary Institutional Democracy

Democratic theory today is radically embroiled with questions of how to transform the basic values of contemporary institutions and, in so doing, recreate a more vibrant civic order. There is a rich wealth of literature on the range of innovations democratic practice can take and the path to harnessing their inherent Democratic Goods, that is, the democratic values they incarnate. Because the decay in contemporary democratic societies is so advanced, the task of reinventing the architecture of democracy has never been more timely and urgent.

Virtuous innovations attempt different ways to incorporate experiments with design features. Broadly, they aim to maximize outputs of democratic goods. From a deep theoretical perspective, democratic innovations like these are the antidote to the decline of the Habermasian public sphere, that is, a protected public space which thrives on public reason, whose decline has occurred because of the slow effacement of democratic institutions at the hands of private power, ones that had inculcated public Goods.

Their burial is the legacy of the hegemony of neoliberal management in modern democracies. It has become the way that private power is now a check and balance on democracy, instead of vice versa.

The purpose of a democratic innovation is to revive, support and consolidate Democratic Goods in terminal decline across the Western liberal polities. It is at once the renaissance, return and redemption of an ancient ideal of the agora — the idealised Greek public — lively with an exchange of ideas, yet an entirely new and qualitatively distinct form of political action that presages radical evolutionary changes in political identities.

In an ideal democracy, power would be equidistant between the public and its deliberative institutions, perfectly and equally balanced. By contrast, current forms have the public, the institutions in elliptical path, orbiting round the nucleus engorged on its own power, and the determiner of the entire work of the whole organic system.

If it is the purpose of a democratic innovation to put citizens at the heart of debate and decision making, then it is possible to see Wikileaks as being exemplary. The collective seeks to equip citizens with maximum information on hidden policy agendas we may appraise as being in or not in the public interest.

Mark Warren named the trend in research and policy towards creating democratic innovations a development of ‘governance-driven democratization’:

“...within this domain that we are seeing a rapid development of what are often called ‘citizen engagement’ and ‘public engagement’ processes — that is, everything from the public hearings and mandatory public comment periods that emerged after World War II, to the stakeholder meetings that began to spread in the 1980s, and to newer consensus conferences, town hall meetings, citizen juries, citizen assemblies, deliberative polling, online dialogues, deliberative planning, participatory budgeting, study circles, planning cells, collaborative learning, and even participatory theatre.

“There are, most probably, nearly one hundred named processes. Typically, these processes use the languages of participation and deliberation; they are designed for particular policy problems; they bypass the formal institutions of democracy, and they do not involve protest, lobbying, or obstruction.” — (2009: 5-6)

You may observe that Wikileaks is indeed construed as “protest, lobbying or obstruction”, however, this is from the perspective of the imperial state — an authoritarian mode of rule — only. In its philosophy pertaining to Democracy, Law, Privacy and Civil Liberties, the collective is not only a thoroughly constitutional actor, but also one who seeks to fortify the constitution against the creation of privatized spheres of power that make decisions above and beyond public purview. In so doing, Wikileaks serves the public interest and common good.

One might proffer the analysis that such dubious duplicity is the reason faith in democracy is ailing. People see through the spectacle and feel that their intelligence and their trust in the system has been insulted.

The essence of humanity is democracy and vice versa. Democratic innovations seek to maximize humanity and justice in the decision-making process by widening participation and meaningful inputs from the people, just as Wikileaks does. We must defend it against the hackneyed diktat of the Clinton faction as being a people’s Mini-public and, moreover, a pacifist research institute with impeccable credentials for telling the truth.

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