

WikiLeaks: News in the Networked Era (review)

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Charlie Beckett and James Ball, *WikiLeaks: News in the Networked Era* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012). 198 pp. ISBN: 978-0-7456-5795-6. Available at: <http://www.polity.co.uk/>

What is new about the WikiLeaks phenomenon and why is it important? Is WikiLeaks a form of journalism? What were the effects of WikiLeaks' revelations? How has WikiLeaks impacted the future of the internet? Charlie Beckett and James Ball pose these and other questions in their new book. Beckett is founder and director of the journalism think tank Polis, as well as a former BBC reporter and author of *SuperMedia: Saving Journalism So It Can Save the World* (2008). James Ball is an investigative journalist for the *Guardian* newspaper and former WikiLeaks employee. The book is organized into four chapters and an epilogue. Chapter one contains a brief historical sketch and demonstrates the ways in which WikiLeaks challenges not just governments, but both mainstream and alternative journalism as well. WikiLeaks is a nonprofit organization that accepts anonymous submissions of previously secret material and publishes them on its internet site. Registered on October 4, 2006, WikiLeaks was managed by a small team of pro-transparency hackers, including the Australian Julian Assange and a few German members of the so-called Chaos Computer Club (18). As Beckett and Ball point out, WikiLeaks founders pioneered in the development of information security, setting up hidden open-source encryption standards. "These enable WikiLeaks and its sources to hold and disseminate information unreadable by anyone else in the world, including security services" (20). WikiLeaks challenges the role of traditional media in the digital age. Unlike mainstream media, WikiLeaks is not constrained by commercial, technical, legal, and

cultural boundaries (9). It has been called the world's "first" stateless media organization (5). Beckett and Ball opine that WikiLeaks itself is "not a revolutionary idea." Rather, it can be seen as a "radical hybrid combining 'hacktivism' with some of the traits of more traditional investigative journalism" (3) At a time when mainstream media outlets have increasingly failed to check abuses of power, many argue that a network like WikiLeaks is sorely needed. As the authors put it, "When the infrastructure which supports journalism is owned entirely by companies, which at their start are free of a journalistic mission, the consequences are troubling and potentially threatening for the operation of a free press" (ix). On the other hand, WikiLeaks was irresponsible in releasing top-secret cables containing the names of undercover informers, thus jeopardizing their lives.

The authors also reveal a paradox, namely that while WikiLeaks and Assange repeatedly condemn governments for their lack of transparency, the WikiLeaks organization itself is very secret and non-transparent. In chapter two, the authors describe three of WikiLeaks' biggest "scoops" in 2010: the Afghan war logs (including the "Collateral Murder" video), the Iraq war logs, and the American Embassy cable releases. These were difficult to leak due to the sheer volume of documents. Assange and others knew that simply leaking so many documents would have very little impact on international public opinion. Earlier leaks had involved the publication of just one secret report. In 2007, for example, WikiLeaks leaked a report about the President of Kenya's extensive laundering of public money to buy property in the UK, New York, South Africa, and Australia. In 2010, WikiLeaks signed contracts with mainstream papers like the *Guardian*, *New York Times*, *Der Spiegel*, and *El Pais* for them to interpret the documents and write articles providing context. The leaks had widespread effects. Arguably, the WikiLeaks stories have changed the way many people think about how the world is run. Some – including Assange – are convinced the publication of the report of the Kenyan leadership's corruption sparked the civil unrest in Kenya during the December 2007 elections. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton bitterly condemned WikiLeaks' actions, not for its use of the internet, but for its handling of "stolen government property" (100). Pro-government hackers managed to take WikiLeaks offline briefly (64). U.S. Senator Joe Lieberman called on enterprises like Amazon.com to ban WikiLeaks from using their

servers (64). Indeed, the widespread effects of the leaks have made governments increasingly defensive about their lack of transparency.

But how has WikiLeaks influenced the future of the internet? In chapter three Beckett and Ball point out that WikiLeaks' disclosures – in jeopardizing lives and endangering sensitive diplomatic operations – might “create a freedom-of-expression backlash,” thus helping pro-government, security-minded individuals who advocate limiting the openness of the internet. This book by Beckett and Ball – one of the first to analyze WikiLeaks with respect to the evolution of contemporary journalism – would be an excellent text to assign in courses on journalism. Other books look more closely at the interpersonal tensions within the organization, Bradley Manning and the origins of the Afghan war leaks, the impact of the leaks on American foreign policy, and the role and personality of Julian Assange. See, for example, Daniel Domscheit-Berg's *Inside WikiLeaks: My Time with Julian Assange at the World's Most Dangerous Website* (2011); Denver Nicks' *Private: Bradley Manning, WikiLeaks, and the Biggest Exposure of Official Secrets in American History* (2012); Alexander Star's and Bill Keller's *Open Secrets: WikiLeaks, War, and American Diplomacy* (2011); and David Leigh's and Luke Harding's *WikiLeaks: Inside Julian Assange's War on Secrecy* (2011).

In short, Beckett's and Ball's work belongs on the growing list of literature that examines the changes to media and international relations in the post-September 11th world.

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