FRAMING WIKILEAKS IN THE NETWORKED FOURTH ESTATE

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Introduction

In 2010, the whistleblowing website and publishing organisation WikiLeaks came to global attention with the release of thousands of restricted U.S. military war logs from Afghanistan and Iraq, and hundreds of U.S. diplomatic cables. WikiLeaks returned recently to global headlines (and controversy) with the 2016 release of emails regarding the campaign of former Democrat presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. It has been suggested this release played a significant role in the eventual success of Donald Trump in the November 2016 election.

WikiLeaks embrace by Trump and other far-right conservatives during the campaign period prompted some media discourse that WikiLeaks had 'fallen from grace' with the liberal media, angered by its perceived meddling is US politics and alleged ties with the Russian state. However, as this paper demonstrates WikiLeaks was never 'a darling of the liberal left' as reported by the *Guardian* newspaper (Smith, 2016).

This paper provides a historical examination of the representations of WikiLeaks by leading U.S. elite media. In the age of the Internet and networked communications, the role of information gathering, investigation and analysis regarding the powerful has extended beyond the boundaries of traditional news organisations and professional journalists in what Yochai Benkler (2013) theorises as the networked fourth estate. Benkler contends the emergent forms of the networked fourth estate are increasingly vulnerable to attacks from institutional media fearful of the decentralisation they represent.

Placing WikiLeaks within the context of the networked fourth estate, the paper applies a news framing analysis to investigate the dominant framing of WikiLeaks by the elite U.S. media to December 2010. It takes up the idea advanced by Manuel Castells (2009) that media has become a space where power is exercised, contested and decided.

According to Castells, a mainstream media presence is key in achieving widespread information distribution, saliency and the persuasion of public opinion. It is, thus, connected directly to the ability of alternative social actors to disrupt institutionalised political power relations and to influence the mainstream political public sphere.

My interest in the media framing of WikiLeaks for this paper developed from the discursive, rhetorical attacks on WikiLeaks by U.S. politicians and some media, following its 2010 releases. I was influenced by Benkler's (2011) argument that WikiLeaks was subject to significant socio-political framing within the 'War on Terror' in the U.S. that undermined its reputational value and restricted severely its operational capacity after Amazon, PayPal and others withdrew their services in December 2010.

The paper analyses WikiLeaks' depiction in two major political journals of record by identifying the construction and use of media frames in the editorial pages of *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. We can consider elite media publications as institutionalised representative frameworks of society (Couldry, 2001; van Dijk, 2008). Therefore, the nature and extent of their editorial coverage of WikiLeaks was vital to its ability to participate effectively as a radical new media actor in the networked fourth estate and to influence and persuade public opinion in the mainstream networked public sphere.

Methodology

This study undertook a framing analysis as a form of textual analysis that identifies the discursive context for understanding elite journalists' representations of WikiLeaks, the expressive elements that depict WikiLeaks' political role and impact, and the reasoning devices that evaluate its legitimacy and significance as a networked political and cultural force.

According to Robert Entman's (2003) oft-cited definition, news framing involves "selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution" (p. 417). It is a principal method by which journalists and politicians influence each other and the public.

I chose to examine editorials and op-ed pieces by senior journalists and guest contributors. Editorials are a newspaper's institutional voice (Hindman & Thomas, 2003) and op-ed contributors are often considered experts in their field or someone with specialised knowledge or status. Unlike news reporting these genres enjoy discursive freedom from objectivity norms (Phelan & Shearer, 2009). They are especially suited to framing analysis because they contain a mixture of evaluative propositions, factual beliefs and the causal attribution of responsibility (Greenberg, 2000).

The final corpus consisted of 47 texts written during the years 2006 to 2010. The coding process involved taking a critical view of frames as "as expressions and outcomes of power" (Reese, 2010, p. 19), rather than benign devices that journalists rely upon to simplify complex information (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

Findings and Analysis

Two questions guided the identification of the frames. First, does WikiLeaks have political legitimacy as a media organisation that contributes to political debate? Second, is WikiLeaks acknowledged to demonstrate political counterpower — that is, do its releases have primarily important and valuable consequences? Analysis of the articles generated four frames consisting of two subsets, with each subset comprising two binary frames. The transgressive frame and its binary, the legitimate frame, emerged in response to the first question. The dismissive frame and its binary, the consequential frame, emerged in response to the second question.

The promotion of an interpretation of WikiLeaks' as a transgressive political and journalistic entity was the dominant primary and secondary frame found in this analysis. Over seventy per cent of articles using this frame appeared in response to the Cablegate release, indicating the highly controversial nature of that event. The second highest occurring frame, the dismissive frame, appeared in all but one instance in the *Post*, rather than the *Times*, and was the predominant frame following the releases of the two sets of war logs. Interestingly, more than half of the articles with a dismissive primary frame also contained a secondary transgressive frame, which reflected the leading political narrative at the time.

The combination of transgressive and dismissive frames worked to discursively attack WikiLeaks on two levels. The dismissive frame worked at the level of content (i.e. the disclosures) and the transgressive frame worked at a structural level (i.e. WikiLeaks, the organisation). The *Times* had only one occurrence of the dismissive frame, written by an op-ed guest contributor. Given the *Times* was benefitting from breaking front-page news coverage because of its relationship with WikiLeaks and *The Guardian*, it is predictable the editors and staff columnists did not minimise the importance of the leaks.

The legitimate and the consequential frames ascribed a positive value to the role of WikiLeaks or to the information it disclosed. There were a significant number (19 out of 47) of articles, overwhelmingly by the *Times*, which used a primary consequential or legitimate frame. While these frames demonstrated the more positive attitude by the *Times* towards WikiLeaks they had less rhetorical resonance and magnitude (Entman, 2004) than they transgressive and dismissive frames. By that I mean they used language that was less noticeable, memorable or emotionally charged. They also lacked the prominence and repetition of the framing devices (that is, the manifest linguistic choices), which therefore decreased the saliency of the promoted interpretation. Because of this, these two frames demonstrated less discursive power and therefore had less potential for reader influence.

It is interesting to note the journalistic ambivalence about WikiLeaks, and the sometimes contradictory nature of media coverage of its activities and leaks. The *Post* dismissed the WikiLeaks' content as trivial or as having been previously reported. Yet at the same time it denounced the organisation as a national security threat and a danger to innocent lives, presenting a somewhat puzzling standard. Being one of WikiLeaks' media partners given exclusive access to the war logs and diplomatic cables the *Times*,

predictably, did not dismiss the content as unimportant. However, its conferral of legitimacy to WikiLeaks as a worthwhile media actor was limited and most often contingent upon the *Times* institutional reporting practices. This suggests a certain tension between the *Times* asserting its authority and having this new source of network international authority, which in some ways undermines the credibility of legacy media. This paper has not examined in detail the news reporting of the WikiLeaks' disclosures. However, preliminary investigations indicate that while both newspapers undermined WikiLeaks potential as new networked media actor in their editorial pages, the news sections continued to publish stories based on the WikiLeaks' content. This disparity between the news and editorial pages suggests an uneven reckoning of WikiLeaks' importance.

Conclusion

As a technologically novel, politically reformist and internationally networked media entity, WikiLeaks can be considered as a form of alternative networked media that challenges hegemonic media and political power. This paper presented a historical analysis that depicted the elite mainstream media news framing of WikiLeaks to 2010 as transgressive and irresponsible, which delegitimised the organisation's value to public sphere discourse and reasserted the mainstream media's central importance in the democratic public sphere. The framing trivialised or vilified the networked counter-public that rallied around WikiLeaks in the wake of the financial blockade and withdrawing of critical Internet services following its Cablegate release.

Neither newspaper explored or even recognised the possibility of WikiLeaks being part of a broader historical shift in the role of news media in the globalisation of communication, culture and politics. Taking up Castells' notion that media is the place where power is decided, by dismissing the informational value of the disclosures, the US elite media weakened WikiLeaks' capacity to exercise any political counterpower that might have meaningful consequences for policy or the mainstream networked public sphere.

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