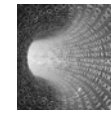

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When old and new media collide: The case of WikiLeaks

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Abstract
In November 2010, WikiLeaks released over a quarter of a million US State Department diplomatic cables to the world's media, exposing private communications between diplomatic officials at US embassies across the globe and the State Department at Washington, DC. This study analyzes the WikiLeaks controversy through institutional views of the US news media. Our analysis of 83 newspaper editorials found four prominent themes in US newspaper discourse: (1) The contrast between the "discretion and maturity" of traditional journalism and the rash actions of WikiLeaks; (2) The need for "old media" in a new media landscape; (3) The tension between the public's right to know and national security; and (4) The invocation of the Pentagon Papers as a way of drawing clear lines of difference between journalism's past and its possible future. Our findings indicate ongoing tension between "old" and "new" media at a time when definitions of journalism are increasingly diffuse.

Keywords
Definitions of journalism, diplomatic cable leaks, editorials, national security, new media, old media, Pentagon Papers, right to know, WikiLeaks

In November 2010, an organization called WikiLeaks released over a quarter of a million US State Department diplomatic cables to the world's media, exposing the private communications between diplomatic officials at US embassies across the globe and the State

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Department at Washington, DC (WikiLeaks, n.d.). Among the information unveiled was the revelation that US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton had authorized intelligence agents to spy on United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (Booth and Borger, 2010), a list of infrastructure sites deemed critical to US national security interests (Kendall, 2010), and somewhat unflattering analyses by diplomatic officials of various world leaders, such as describing former North Korean dictator Kim Jong-il as a "flabby old chap" (Booth and Tisdall, 2010). The leak attracted immediate controversy, with Vice President Joe Biden branding WikiLeaks' founder and editor-in-chief Julian Assange a "high-tech terrorist" (MacAskill, 2010).

WikiLeaks was founded in 2006 as an international non-profit organization specializing in the publication of "classified, censored or otherwise restricted material of political, diplomatic or ethical significance" obtained via anonymous sources (Fildes, 2010). Prior to the State Department leaks, the organization had already built a controversial reputation for publishing screenshots of 2008 US vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin's email inbox (Schor, 2008) and footage of US military personnel shooting unarmed Iraqi civilians (McGreal, 2010). While WikiLeaks has received criticism for its actions, it has also been the subject of praise from commentators who point to the organization's journalistic value. For example, WikiLeaks has been described as being "as important a journalistic tool as the [US] Freedom of Information Act," (Schmidt, 2007), and part of "the brave new world of investigative journalism" (Gonsalves, 2008). Jay Rosen (2010) dubbed WikiLeaks the world's first "stateless news organization," a new model for information dissemination in an age of blurred media boundaries, while Roy Greenslade (2010), of the British newspaper *The Guardian*, praised the victory for "data journalism" that WikiLeaks had won.

The norms and values of journalism are, in a networked media environment, increasingly contested turf (Lowrey, 2006; Singer, 2010). This study makes a unique contribution to the literature by looking at how a new and prominent player in the media landscape – namely, WikiLeaks – was the subject of comment and criticism by established players within that same ecology – namely, the editors and editorial boards of mainstream US newspapers. WikiLeaks has, for some, taken on the mantle of journalism in keeping a watchful eye on powerful interests. What do those institutions that have traditionally occupied this monitorial role have to say about this new actor on the media landscape? Examining journalistic introspection on matters of professional identity helps us understand the field's norms, values, and boundaries, a matter of acute importance at a time when technological innovation and economic uncertainty are destabilizing already porous boundaries (Ryfe, 2009; Usher, 2010). At a time when, purportedly, "anyone and everyone can be a journalist" (Gerlis, 2008: 126), how do the keepers of traditional journalistic values respond to a challenge to their very own paradigm? Accordingly, this study examines US newspaper editorials to determine how the mainstream US media represented WikiLeaks during the cable leak controversy.

Literature review

National security is a problematic area when it comes to freedom of information. On one hand legislators must balance the need for a well-informed citizenry and a healthy

democracy against the need to maintain the safety and security of the citizens of the United States. One such test case of this tension is the "Pentagon Papers" case of 1971, in which federal employee Daniel Ellsberg, who wanted to "change the course of the Vietnam War" (Burke, 2008: 34), leaked classified documents pertaining to that war to *The New York Times*. An injunction on behalf of President Richard Nixon saw the case come before the US Supreme Court, which upheld the right of the press to publish information of public concern. The tension between information and national security that the Pentagon Papers and cases like it pose is magnified in the contemporary media age, where "the Daniel Ellsbergs of today can skip the editorial process and instantly publish their information to the world" (Burke, 2008: 34). The question becomes, how do we adapt this notion to a media environment when the definitions that demarcate what is and is not journalism, and who is and is not a journalist, are increasingly fluid and diffuse? Who is a journalist, in any case?

Defining journalism and journalists

There is no straightforward answer to the question of "who is a journalist." While the question may seem "disarmingly simple" it actually contains "serious ethical, legal, and craft ramifications" (Black, 2010: 103). To illustrate, we might agree that those that disseminate hard news that the public "needs to know" are journalists, whatever medium they work in. But beyond this narrow turf, we immediately encounter problems of definition. Are opinion columnists journalists, for example? If so, do we then extend membership of the club to panelists on late night political talk shows? What of "shock jock" radio presenters? What about music and theater critics, documentary filmmakers, or public relations professionals? The point here is not necessarily to advocate for an all-inclusive definition but rather to point out that even *before* we broach the topic of new media, there are already complex definitional issues afoot.

There has never been a fixed definition of who is (and is not) a journalist, in part because there has never quite been agreement on what is (and is not) journalism. If we look at journalism in the United States in particular, there are no educational prerequisites of its practitioners, no entrance exam, license, or certification that deems one a journalist, and no formal credentialing body that would enforce the fidelity of such definitions (Meyers et al., 2012). If any of the above existed, defining who is (and is not) a journalist would be rather straightforward. However, definitional assessments are significantly more complex due to their absence. Instead, such definitions are borne out through negotiation with sets of norms, values, and practices that structure the journalistic community as a body of individuals of shared purpose (Zelizer, 1993).

Journalists are socialized into the "interpretive community" in the newsroom, where they are attuned to the values of the field and ascertain standards about what is and is not acceptable conduct (Zelizer, 1993). Through "strategic rituals" such as practicing objectivity, journalists are absorbed into the interpretive community, which perpetuates itself by and through these very practices (Molotch and Lester, 1974; Tuchman, 1972, 1973). As a result, these norms become central to the strength of the paradigm. For example, we know from historical studies of the evolution of American journalism how objectivity became a gold standard for good journalism and was adopted as the mantle by which not

only good journalism but journalism *itself* was assessed (Schudson, 1978, 2001; Vos, 2012). Objectivity is generally (and uncritically) considered to be part of the journalistic canon, and journalism that does not conform to it can be dismissed as "not journalism" as a result of its failure to adhere to the norm.

The journalistic community has consistently distanced itself from those who have violated its norms and values, a form of "paradigm repair" that casts out unwelcome presences and patches together the damaged boundaries of the field. Such repair work helps to define the "boundaries of permissible journalism" (Eason, 1986: 430; see also Berkowitz, 2000; Hindman, 2003). Who *is* received into membership of the interpretive community is a matter for its members, defined through adherence to, and compatibility with, the norms and values of the community.

Normative theories like the watchdog theory of the press stem revolve around the "checking value" provided by the news media (Blasi, 1977: 523). Under such a system, the role of the press is to keep a watchful eye on government abuse of its power and promote political awareness among the public so that informed decisions can be made. In short, journalists are to act as "the eyes and ears of the people" (Hindman, 1997: 3). Journalism's sense of moral purpose and ethical values, stemming from the fiduciary role it shoulders, weighs heavily on the field's sense of identity (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001). This also puts in place rigid boundaries about who gets to occupy this role, and who does not, determining that it is the journalist who is best placed to determine what the public needs to know (Gans, 2003). However, new technologies have flattened the media landscape, and whereas formerly the journalist served as the arbiter of what the public should (and should not) know, the contemporary media environment is characterized by "an exploding array of news sources [and] producers of content" (Pavlik, 2008: 79). The internet, the catalyst for the maelstrom of changes in the field, "has not only become highly important in itself, but has forced all the media around it to change accordingly" (Gauntlett, 2009: 148). Journalists – once the dominant institutional actors in the mass communication of information – must now share the media jungle with new (and excitable) beasts.

Scholars have argued that the evolving media landscape has cultivated a generation of new watchdogs, with citizens empowered by technological innovations to create their own forms of journalism and new organizations emboldened by the possibilities to contribute to a changing journalistic milieu (Gant, 2007; Gillmor, 2004). This is the core of what Christians et al. (2009) describe as the "Fifth Estate," where the polity harnesses the power of technology to "subject the media themselves to scrutiny" (241). It is to the relationship between "old" and "new" media that we now turn.

Old vs. new media

The relationship between "old" and "new" media has not been straightforward or harmonious. Scholars have found that traditional journalists have responded with a degree of positivity to the new media environment, either in harnessing technological innovations for journalistic ends or by adapting to the challenges of the converged newsroom (Bivins, 2008; Lowrey and Mackay, 2008). Others have argued that the two camps have become rivals, with old media bemoaning new media's lack of traditional skills and emphasis on

speed over accuracy, and new media criticizing old media's inability to live up to the fiduciary role it has carved for itself (Allan, 2006; Bruns, 2005). Studies have found conventional journalists to be openly hostile to certain players in the new media environment (such as bloggers) who are seen as uncouth contributors to the public sphere, lacking journalistic judgment, temperament, and responsibility (Lowrey, 2006; O'Sullivan and Heinonen, 2008). Nguyen (2008) has written of journalism's culture of fear in the face of technological innovation; a combination perhaps of economic uncertainty and skepticism about the usurpers to the journalistic throne.

When it comes to the question of what is and is not journalism, Jones and Himelboim (2010) found that journalists framed bloggers as simultaneously a threat to journalism and not a form of journalism, thus policing the boundaries of journalism. Cassidy (2005) found that print journalists emphasized their investigative and interpretive role while online journalists emphasized the swiftness with which information could be disseminated. O'Sullivan and Heinonen (2008) found that while print journalists agreed that new media was a useful tool, they held deep reservations over who is defined as a journalist, a stance that suggests they warm to the internet "when it suits their existing professional ends, [but] are much less enthusiastic about, and unlikely to promote, radical change in news work" (368). Jha (2008), meanwhile, found that journalists were skeptical about the ability of new media to help the public navigate controversial issues like protests and social movements. A blunter assessment is provided by Ugland and Henderson (2007), who describe the reflections of journalists at a Poynter Institute discussion, where one journalist argued "we all know what a journalist is, and it's silliness to argue about it," and another dismissed the debate as "just so much sanctimonious bullshit" (242). Usher (2010), meanwhile, found that journalists dismissed as a result of cutbacks were still wedded to the traditional model of journalism, even as it crumbled around them and they felt the reverberations in their own lives. Lahav and Reich (2011) have warned that the desperation of journalists to cling to old models and resist change may in fact doom the medium altogether.

This study makes a unique contribution to the literature by analyzing the WikiLeaks controversy through institutional views of the US news media, ascertained through analysis of newspaper editorials. Unconstrained by the norm of objectivity, editorials represent a space where the perspective of a particular newspaper can be articulated. Editorials are therefore "as close as is possible to… an institutional voice of each newspaper" (Hindman, 2003: 671). Though newspapers are, of course, only one type of news medium, their long history of editorializing – combined with a dearth of unsigned editorials from other news media – suggests that newspaper editorials provide a suitable source of institutional voice. The research question for this study is thus: *How was WikiLeaks' relationship with journalism represented in mainstream US newspapers following the 2010 diplomatic cable leaks?*

Method

The data were obtained by searching the LexisNexis and NewsBank databases using the keyword "WikiLeaks." The timeframe for the data was November 28, 2010 (the date of the publication of the US State Department diplomatic cables leaks) to December 28,

2010. Analyzing a month's coverage enabled us to capture both instantaneous, "knee-jerk" reactions and more considered responses. While limiting the timeframe to one month does necessarily limit the amount of comment this study examines, we wanted to focus our analysis on those editorials that dealt with the cable leaks and thus WikiLeaks' emergence as a "journalistic" actor and not, for example, the subsequent furor over the sexual activities of its founder and editor-in-chief Julian Assange. Though WikiLeaks remained a hot news topic as 2011 began, subsequent coverage seemed to focus more on the personalities involved (such as Assange, accused leaker Private First Class Bradley Manning, and House Oversight and Government Reform Committee chairman Rep. Darrell Issa, who wanted to investigate the leaks). We concluded that the first month following the release of the cables would provide adequate data to address the research question sufficiently.

Only US newspapers were analyzed and only editorials were in the search parameters; other article types (hard news, op-eds, letters to the editor, and miscellaneous articles) were excluded. We also eliminated editorials in which WikiLeaks was mentioned in passing and not the substantive focus of the editorial. The sum total of data was 83 editorials. The data was analyzed using the "ethnographic content analysis" method articulated by Altheide (1987, 1996), a qualitative approach to content analysis where the analysis is inductive and does not analyze phenomena with a pre-determined schema in mind. Instead, it allows themes to emerge through repeated, in-depth analysis. The editorials were read and re-read with key themes, patterns, and features noted throughout. Axial coding was used to bring "previously separate categories together under a principle of integration" (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002: 221).

Findings

Our analysis found four themes in US newspaper discourse on WikiLeaks, each of which illuminated an aspect of the friction between old and new media: (1) The contrast between the "discretion and maturity" of traditional journalism and the rash actions of WikiLeaks; (2) The need for "old media" (and consequent values) in a new media landscape; (3) The tension between the public's right to know and national security; and (4) The invocation of the Pentagon Papers as a way of drawing clear lines of difference between journalism's past and its possible future.

"Discretion and maturity" vs. "internet intifadists"

US newspaper editorials reinforced the distinction between old and new media by emphasizing the lack of discretion on the part of WikiLeaks. The contrast drawn here was between traditional journalism's emphasis on discretion, responsibility, and good judgment and WikiLeaks' aggressive, devil-may-care approach to the mass communication of information. In drawing such a contrast, the editorials positioned old media as the true stewards of the public interest, with WikiLeaks and its operatives lacking the values and ethics necessary to belong in the journalistic community. The context here is journalism's traditional role as the gatekeeper of what reaches the public domain. An illustration of this came from *The Philadelphia Inquirer*: "Government alone doesn't get to decide

what information is safe for public consumption in this country. Too often, government officials hide documents simply to save themselves from embarrassment" (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 2010: A12). The implied subtext here is that it is the news media that decide "what information is safe for public consumption." This reinforces the notion of the press as watchdog, guarding against government excess and abuse of power, and positioning the media as the party on the side of the public. It simultaneously reinforces traditional media as the institution possessing the abilities necessary to filter what does and does not need to reach the eyes and ears of the public. For the *Austin American-Statesman*, journalism consists of making "measured, careful decisions" about what to publish and what to withhold (*Austin American-Statesman*, 2010: A8). This would be the test against which WikiLeaks' journalistic merit, or lack thereof, would be assessed.

WikiLeaks was accused of lacking the kinds of characteristics that traditional journalists hold dear. *The Baltimore Sun* argued that the role of newspapers and consumers is "to respond to the actions of WikiLeaks with precisely the discretion and maturity that the group lacks" (*The Baltimore Sun*, 2010: A12). In a similar vein, the *Journal-Standard* of Freeport, Illinois argued that while "some secrets should be exposed, and news organizations must continue to dig up evidence of corruption, malfeasance, and wrongdoing… that doesn't mean we have to embrace the over-sharing enabled by the Internet" (*The Journal-Standard*, 2010). Just because the technology to share information is available does not necessarily mean it should be used blindly. Instead, it must be tempered with journalistic acumen. For the *Austin American-Statesman*, WikiLeaks had not exercised such acumen in its release of the diplomatic documents, simply dropping them into the public domain with seemingly little thought of the consequences:

> We are not impressed with what WikiLeaks does with the documents post-procurement. What it does is publish them – all of them – on its website. This seems to be done without a critical eye toward whether any of them carry the potential to endanger entire nations or specific people. This is irresponsible (*Austin American-Statesman*, 2010: A8).

The newspaper further drew the distinction between WikiLeaks and traditional journalism by arguing, "WikiLeaks has an obligation to do far more than merely pass on every bit of secret information it obtains. That's what legitimate news organizations do" (*Austin American-Statesman*, 2010: A8). As WikiLeaks lacks this crucial capacity or willingness to filter, it therefore cannot be a "legitimate" journalistic actor. *The Lima News* drew reference to the "Internet sensibility" that stressed sharing and openness (*The Lima News*, 2010), which can be contrasted with a journalistic sensibility that (apparently) stresses discipline and caution in the information it commits to the public domain.

Newspapers suggested that WikiLeaks and, in particular, its founder Julian Assange had acted irresponsibly by allowing this information to fall unredacted into the public's hands, which again reinforced a distinction between old and new media. For *The Charlotte Observer*, "news organizations and Internet operations such as WikiLeaks should not release secret information simply because they have access to it and can attract readers" (*The Charlotte Observer*, 2010: A8). Separating "news organizations" from "Internet operations such as WikiLeaks" clearly indicates that the two groupings are to be considered mutually exclusive. A further, perhaps more understated, distinction

is drawn around the issue of responsibility; the implication being that a traditional journalist would not simply release information they possessed simply *because* they possessed it. It is instead a balancing act, as articulated by *The Anniston Star*: "This week's massive release of thousands of previously confidential US State Department communications is being done in a manner less than what has traditionally been called journalism" (*The Anniston Star*, 2010: 8). In other words, WikiLeaks, and possibly other new actors on the media horizon who wish to pass themselves off as journalists, are being given a warning: If you want to be one of us, you must act like one of us. WikiLeaks' unwillingness to adhere to the restraint characteristic of traditional journalism means it is, for now at least, not welcome in the club.

The dichotomy between mature, responsible journalism and immature, reckless WikiLeaks was illustrated by *The Journal-Standard*. The paper described WikiLeaks as "an organization that claims to serve the people by outing secrets," clearly aspiring to wear the garb of a journalist, but such aspirations are not followed with responsible conduct: "Assange not only allowed the release of the information, he has been teasing the administration with the slow drop of juicy tidbits and damning disclosures" (*The Journal-Standard*, 2010). While WikiLeaks shares journalism's aversion to secrets, it is there that the similarity ends; journalism would surely, we are told, behave much more responsibly. The *New York Post* drew out this distinction further: "despite his claims… to be a journalist, Assange has done huge damage" (*New York Post*, 2010: 34). For the New York *Daily News*:

> The latest breed of anarchist is not a protester who takes to the streets, Molotov cocktail in hand. His weapon of choice is the laptop and his battleground the Internet, which he uses to steal information or to disrupt life in the digital age. The personification of these Internet intifadists is Julian Assange of WikiLeaks infamy (*Daily News*, 2010a: 22).

In a separate editorial, the *Daily News* condemned those who supported WikiLeaks, claiming "Anyone still entertaining the notion that WikiLeaks' Julian Assange is a truth-hunting journalist for the cyber age is deluded" – Assange was not a journalist but an "ax-grinding, anti-American criminal whose weapon happens to be information" (*Daily News*, 2010b: 37). For many newspapers, Assange had no claim to journalistic credibility and was instead "little more than a bully, a man with an ax to grind" (*Las Vegas Sun*, 2010b), coordinating the activities of "a bunch of thugs" (*Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 2010) and "digital pirates" (*The Santa Fe New Mexican*, 2010: A9). Making explicit the distinction between the ethics of WikiLeaks and the ethics of journalism, *The Journal-Standard* argued that "reasonable journalists have always thought long and hard about the life-and-death impact of their work" (*The Journal-Standard*, 2010). Assange and his rogue outfit have not given sufficient thought to the consequences of their actions; thus, it is implied, they can neither be seen as "reasonable" nor "journalists."

We still need old media!

While WikiLeaks was described as lacking the concern for public welfare that journalists possessed, editorials took a different approach when discussing the mainstream

newspapers that ran content passed on to them from WikiLeaks, notably *The New York Times* but also international newspapers like *The Guardian* of the United Kingdom and *Der Spiegel* of Germany. These publications had been selected by WikiLeaks to disseminate the information contained in the cables, albeit in redacted and excerpted form. A sharp distinction was drawn between such publications and WikiLeaks itself, as the following excerpt from *The Dallas Morning News* illustrates:

> Secretary of State Hillary Clinton… correctly insists that those who steal government documents face prosecution. But once such information becomes available, newspapers cannot simply ignore it. Instead, newspapers are charged with ensuring that there is true news value in what gets published. It's doubtful that WikiLeaks will exercise the same discretion, which is why this case remains so troubling (*The Dallas Morning News*, 2010: A16).

The implication here is that newspapers can be trusted to exercise discretion and do so by default, as a part of the hardwiring of the journalistic mind. On the other hand, WikiLeaks *cannot* be trusted to exercise the same discretion because it lacks the values of traditional journalism. The *Morning News* continued:

> Most news organizations staunchly support the free flow of information, but editors must constantly ask themselves: When is disclosure not appropriate? When is it best for the public not to know? No single, definitive answer applies to all cases, but it is clear that material such as the latest from WikiLeaks calls for meticulous vetting (*The Dallas Morning News*, 2010: A16).

This "meticulous vetting" should, of course, be done by traditional journalists and editors, for they possess the skills and experience necessary to determine what the public needs to know, as the *Chattanooga Times Free Press* points out: "The *Times* has promised to carefully edit, exclude, or redact the material it publishes to protect sensitive sources and important secret material" (*Chattanooga Times Free Press*, 2010: A13).

These arguments reinforce the legitimacy of traditional journalism as the sole and legitimate stewards of the public interest. Even though WikiLeaks has attained the leaked information, it is traditional journalism that does the necessary work of sifting through it and determining what the public needs to know. This is illustrated by *The Anniston Star*:

> Leaked government material has traditionally been publicized in order to serve a higher good, one that leads to correction of misdeeds. What's at play this week is something quite different, a forest of memos that must be sorted out by WikiLeaks' newspaper partners (*The Anniston Star*, 2010: 8).

Left to their own devices, WikiLeaks would provide a meandering and formless "forest of memos." It is the job of newspapers to give these memos shape, framing them in a way the public can understand, and shielding them from information they do not need to know. The *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reinforced the need for a sagacious editorial overseer:

> While we strongly believe in government transparency, it must be tempered with editorial judgment: What is relevant to the public interest, what is merely salacious or potentially damaging to national security? WikiLeaks showed relatively little such discretion in its online posting of more than 250,000 diplomatic cables (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 2010: B6).

Meanwhile, *The Charlotte Observer* praised the *New York Times* for behaving responsibly:

> The *Times* came into possession of this secret information. At that point, it could ignore it, in which case it would still become public worldwide through WikiLeaks… Or it could provide the information in context, with analysis, carefully withholding any information it believed would jeopardize national security. That is what the *Times* did (*The Charlotte Observer*, 2010: A8).

The implication is that it is *only* traditional journalism that can act as the steward of the public interest. This underscores the importance of traditional media; even as new media players like WikiLeaks emerge and threaten journalism's traditional gatekeeping role, it is only the newspaper that can truly serve the public interest.

The lines between leakers and middle men like WikiLeaks that release information and the reputable news organizations that publish this information were further demarcated by the *Los Angeles Times*, which stated: "We don't question the right of news organizations to publish excerpts of the 250,000 diplomatic dispatches released by WikiLeaks. For good or ill, the information was going to end up in the public domain. The responsible party is WikiLeaks" (*Los Angeles Times*, 2010a: A16). A curious position was articulated here. The news media's right to publish this information was defended; indeed, it is above interrogation, as the editorial plainly stated. However, the right of third parties like WikiLeaks to provide the news media with information was scrutinized and threatened. Given this distinction, it is unclear how restricted information beyond the reach of a journalist, without the aid of a whistleblower, could ever possibly come into the public domain.

Right to know?

Editorials articulated the tension between the public's right to information on the workings of their government and the government's need to maintain national security in the interests of that same public. This is a common thread in the history of journalism and free expression in the United States, one, as *The Charlotte Observer* pointed out, "the nation has wrestled with before and, in an increasingly wired world, will again" (*The Charlotte Observer*, 2010: A8). The tension is amplified further in the post-9/11 era and their leaking of diplomatic cables leaves WikiLeaks at the tension's nexus, seeing them draw both praise and criticism for their conduct.

Some newspapers affirmed their support for WikiLeaks and Assange. The *New Haven Register*, for example, provided historical context by pointing out that "even with the mortal perils of World War II, the principle of a free press held firm" (*New Haven Register*, 2010: A7), subtley alluding to WikiLeaks' standing as a media actor. The *Los*

Angeles Times, meanwhile, noted that Assange "would no doubt argue – honestly – that his expectation was that release of the documents actually would serve US interests by exposing official wrongdoing to the citizenry" (*Los Angeles Times*, 2010b: A28). The *St. Petersburg Times* defended WikiLeaks on the grounds that "more and not less information is needed" due to the complex realities of international affairs that are in the public interest (*St. Petersburg Times*, 2010: 2). This perspective holds that if the cause of freedom is to be defended, there must be the broadest possible commitment to government openness. For *The Philadelphia Inquirer*:

> There will always be a tension between the public's right to know and the government's desire to conceal. National security concerns notwithstanding, the public is entitled to a full understanding of how and why its representatives form policies that affect us all (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 2010: A12).

This means that open governance, in this instance, serves a higher purpose than short-term strategic national security interests, a sentiment echoed by *The Charleston Gazette*:

> We're glad the hidden records were revealed, because they give Americans honest, factual, blunt, truthful information about international dealings – not the cautious whitewash contained in official press releases. American taxpayers pay the salaries of all Washington bureaucrats and overseas diplomats. Americans have a right to know frank facts about foreign entanglements (*The Charleston Gazette*, 2010: A4).

The public interest also was invoked by the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*: "As a news medium this newspaper has to welcome the greater accessibility to insider, on-the-ground-sourced information on US government thinking on a given subject" (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 2010: B6). The gist of the assertion is that journalists are supposed, by default, to support access to government information.

However, many newspapers took a very aggressive stance against WikiLeaks. *The Oklahoman*, for example, argued, "WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange clearly aims to harm US credibility if not its power. This isn't transparency as much as it's a selective disrobing to undercut American trustworthiness" (*The Oklahoman*, 2010: A8). Again, distinctions were drawn between old and new media, as illustrated by *The Baltimore Sun*:

> The philosophy of WikiLeaks, such as it is, seems to be that all information should be freely, openly available and that there is no cause to hold any one secret to be any more deserving of protection than another… the effect of the practice is more to heighten the publicity for the release rather than to rationally discern what merits public discussion and what doesn't (*The Baltimore Sun*, 2010: A12).

The *Sun*'s stance is that WikiLeaks is either incapable or unwilling to engage in the kind of scrutiny to determine what information should reach the public. *Newsday*, meanwhile, situated WikiLeaks within a broader culture of internet openness that was simply incompatible with the dangers of modern geopolitics:

> The notion that absolutely everything must occur in the public eye reflects the kind of childish utopianism the Internet itself should have cured us of by now. WikiLeaks' utopianism isn't just childish; it's also tragic. The site's idealistic rhetoric faults US officials for failing to live up to George Washington's ideal of honesty, as if the world were just some dicey kindergarten (*Newsday*, 2010: A30).

Balancing the public interest against national security, *Newsday* argued that "all governments are too secretive, ours included, and document leaks can be a valuable means of exposing wrongdoing. But in this case, there is little benefit – and a high cost" (*Newsday*, 2010: A30).

Newspapers opposed to WikiLeaks wrote at length and with great drama about the consequences of the leaks for US national security and strategic interests. This was a "dangerous document dump" (*Daily News*, 2010b: A37) that might potentially "hinder US diplomacy" (*The Oklahoman*, 2010: A8), "put in harm's way Afghans who have cooperated with US efforts" (*The Washington Post*, 2010: A24), "imperil America's vital alliances, deepen rifts with competitors, and endanger lives" (*Daily News*, 2010c: 22), and "disrupt global harmony (such as it is) by driving a wedge between allies and chilling honest dialogue between diplomats" (*Newsday*, 2010: A30). The New York *Daily News* offered a colorful assessment of the situation, arguing that "web-savvy jihadists are scouring the WikiLeaks documents for signs of American vulnerability," information that would be used by "those most willing and able to harm the United States" (*Daily News*, 2010a: 22). "In sum," the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* suggested, the leaks had been "quite negative in terms of US interests" (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 2010: B6). The *Los Angeles Times* agreed, arguing that when balanced against the public interest, the leaks "will make the conduct of foreign policy more difficult without providing much edification to the American public" (*Los Angeles Times*, 2010a: A16).

Appealing to journalism's history

Finally, newspapers articulated a problem with journalism's possible future by appealing to its past by comparing the WikiLeaks cable leaks with the Pentagon Papers case that illuminated the conduct of a previous government vis-à-vis their policy in Vietnam. The comparisons were, generally, unfavorable. Assessing the contribution of the WikiLeaks cables for public edification, the *Las Vegas Sun* commented: "There is nothing either explosive or groundbreaking… These are hardly the Pentagon Papers" (*Las Vegas Sun*, 2010a). Elsewhere, *The State Journal-Register* of Springfield, Illinois, drew a stark comparison between the heroic conduct of Daniel Ellsberg and the deliberate harm caused by WikiLeaks:

> Ellsberg's leak was an act of conscience. Having helped compile the exhaustive, top-secret Vietnam War history we now know as the Pentagon Papers, Ellsberg could not abide continued warfare for what clearly was a lost and fundamentally flawed cause. Likewise, many other important news stories have become public only because secret documents were leaked to journalists. We may never have known about the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison, to cite just one well-known recent example, without such leaks. Assange, however, is neither conscientious not

> purpose-driven in his revelations… Creating chaos for chaos' sake is not a noble cause; it's dangerous mischief (*The State Journal-Register*, 2010: 8).

This drew a clear dichotomy between the values of traditional journalism – situating the Pentagon Papers as part of this legacy – and the values of WikiLeaks. The organization, unlike Ellsberg, is depicted as being reckless and acting with total disregard for the consequences of its actions. This was echoed by the *Journal Inquirer* of Manchester, Connecticut: "When Daniel Ellsberg released 'The Pentagon Papers,' there was a compelling national interest. And he took responsibility. Neither is the case here" (*Journal Inquirer*, 2010). The *Albuquerque Journal* took a similarly dim view of WikiLeaks' conduct: "WikiLeaks should not be confused with a journalistic enterprise or nostalgically be compared to Daniel Ellsberg's 1971 release of the Pentagon Papers" (*Albuquerque Journal*, 2010: A6).

By comparing WikiLeaks to perhaps its most analogous historical referent, these newspapers policed the boundaries of their field by asserting that the newcomer to the media landscape had no right to wear the mantle of such a storied part of American journalism's legacy. When allied to the other discourses excerpted here, we get a sense of an industry keen to protect its future by asserting ownership of its past. Perhaps nowhere was this more explicit than in the *Omaha World-Herald*'s extensive quoting of the journalist and academic Todd Gitlin, who offers his own first-hand take on events:

> Ellsberg's release of the Pentagon Papers was a great democratic act that helped clarify for the American public how its leaders had misled it for years… By contrast, WikiLeaks' huge data dump… is indiscriminate. Assange slashes and burns with impunity… I know Daniel Ellsberg. Mr. Assange, you are no Daniel Ellsberg (*Omaha World-Herald*, 2010: B4).

Quoting Gitlin provides credibility for the newspaper's position: that WikiLeaks is a dangerous outfit with no legitimate claim to journalism, and that Assange is a pretender to Ellsberg's throne. As both an activist familiar with Ellsberg and a scholar of journalism, Gitlin becomes a functionary through which traditional journalistic values can be asserted and the boundaries of journalism can be policed. Like other comparisons with Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers case, the editorial serves as a reminder of what does and does not constitute journalism.

Conclusion

This study examined US mainstream newspaper editorials to examine their reaction to the WikiLeaks cable leak controversy, in order to illuminate how "old media" as an institution reacted to a prominent incident involving "new media." We found that clear dividing lines were drawn around the issue of journalistic judgment; that old media reasserted its usefulness in the digital age; that the tension between the public's right to know and national security is as prominent as ever in the new media environment; and that newspapers drew clear distinctions between its storied past and possible future.

The data analyzed here point to the ongoing tension between old and new media. From the perspective of the newspapers' editorial boards, the watchdog model of the press still exists but is largely the preserve of traditional media outlets like newspapers

that are better able to use journalistic acumen and judgment to serve the public interest, while newcomers like WikiLeaks lack these competencies and therefore cannot lay claim to the watchdog role. This, of course, does not lead us closer to resolving the question of who is a journalist and who is not. What this analysis reveals, however, is that "old" news media, for better or for worse, are determinedly protecting their turf against new media upstarts like WikiLeaks and Julian Assange. Even editorials that praised the information yielded through the leaks often reflected on the need for sound judgment on the part of the newspapers that then published the leaked materials, reinforcing the need for journalists and editors to play their traditional interpretive role of sorting out the newsworthy from the useless and the items of public interest from the threats to national security. While this study cannot claim to speak about all of new media (indeed, given the diversity of "new media," the term itself is increasingly lacking in utility), it has offered a snapshot into how traditional media outlets like newspapers responded to an extremely prominent event in the news cycle that has placed the role of new communication technologies firmly in the public eye. That WikiLeaks and Assange were described as "Internet intifadists," (Daily News, 2010a: 22) among other choice epithets, is illuminative about the somewhat scornful way "old" media claim the mantle of "journalist" while concurrently denying that position to "new" media.

With regard to the tension between open governance and national security, it was surprising to see editorials taking a strong stance against WikiLeaks on the grounds that certain information should be kept hidden from the public. Such editorials juxtaposed the utopian notion of freedom of information that the internet engenders against the *realpolitik* of a dangerous, uncertain world in which the United States faces threats at home and abroad. For these newspapers, the public interest was best served not by publishing the information but by withholding it, for it would be through the latter option that American foreign policy interests – and, logically, the interests of the American public – could best be served. From this perspective, arguing that leaks need to be prevented is a simple acknowledgement of the complicated nature of contemporary geopolitics, where the public does *not* need to know every last minutiae of government business and diplomacy serves a vital role in protecting American interests. As indicated in our findings above, there was some praise for WikiLeaks, however.

In part because of sexual abuse charges against founder Julian Assange and an effort by financial corporations to block monetary donations to the site (Burns, 2011), WikiLeaks faces an uncertain future. So, too, does traditional journalism. While journalists like those working for newspapers may continue doggedly to protect their turf as stewards of the public interest, it remains to be seen whether they will be successful in this fight. Meanwhile, WikiLeaks poses many challenges to the modern nation-state and how it manages its information. Whether "old media" and governments like it or not, organizations like WikiLeaks are changing the media landscape and posing fundamental challenges to journalistic norms and values. To quote Nossek (2009), "the profession of journalism has been superseded by technology" (358), and there is little utility in yearning for the halcyon days of old, if ever they existed. How the institution of journalism responds to the dismantling of its borders, and whether or not it can articulate a new mission for itself when it is undergoing issues of definitional uncertainty, will be a critical issue facing journalism in the years to come.

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