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The Politics of Transparency

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Abstract

This article investigates society's increasing obsession with transparency through the medium of photography and WikiLeaks. It suggests that Julian Assange's fixation on exposure as a means to reveal the truth about government systems is reflective of the processes of an ideology of publicity that also works in a society governed through the processes of the spectacle. In this investigation, Retort's work, claiming that the spectacle hides the violence inherent in neoliberal militarism, is employed to support the ways in which WikiLeaks has become a spectacle in and of itself through its implication in processes of capitalism and the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The paper also investigates the ways in which the increased desire for transparency has accorded itself with the right to visibility, which is ultimately linked to a desire for truth. Judith Butler's theory of framing is explored to highlight the ways in which information cannot always be entirely contained by the frame (of reality and photography). Ariella Azoulay's *The Civil Contract of Photography* also becomes a departure point for elucidating the problematic tendency for those who attempt to reveal what is hidden to become too invested in the potentiality for truth in what is intentionally excluded from the field of visibility.

Keywords: transparency, WikiLeaks, publicity, war, exposure, capitalism, spectacle

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Introduction

The terms “truth”, “freedom” and “democracy” frequently occur in the promulgation of intrinsic values and ideologies belonging to North American political and societal systems. However, the recent movement for transparency has put these values into question and has consequently generated a public that is becoming increasingly cognizant of the imbalanced power relations within the socio-political framework of the North American society. The notion that access to, and control over information is linked to the function of power has become a key part of the transparency movement, as expounded by WikiLeaks creator, Julian Assange. In a 2011 interview with Hans Ulrich, Assange claimed that “if we are to build a robust civilization, we need a sophisticated and somewhat comprehensive intellectual record of everything that humanity is about” (Ulrich, Part 2, 2011). During the interview, Assange makes several calls to mend the gaping hole in what he calls the *intellectual record*. Assange’s response, which hinges on the notion that a civilized society is a democratic society devoid of government secrets, is problematic

because it alludes to a frame of thinking that may potentially be more destructive for democracy than reparative.

Julian Assange's obsession with secrecy and his presumption that identifying and revealing secrets will lead to new knowledge is indicative of a pathology that is characteristic of conspiratorial thinkers (Zizek, 2011). This pathology is manifested in a persistent, even compulsive desire to transgress and illuminate boundaries that are erected to protect secrets despite the potential ramifications. In her book *Publicity's Secret*, Jodi Dean (2002) suggests that the misguided belief that more information leads to improved democratic systems is consequential of technoculture's ideology, whereby publicity is the key to democracy (p. 4). In this way, Assange's desire to "publish everything that is of diplomatic, political, ethical, or historical significance that has not been published before, and is being suppressed" ignores any and all ethical frameworks in favour of performing an anarchistic ritual of exposure (Ulrich, Part 2, 2011). As a corollary of Assange's fixation on exposure and publicity, he primarily implements WikiLeaks as a medium where the inculcation of an ideology of publicity can occur. The damaging irony lies in the fact that the very undemocratic nature of North America's socio-political system that Assange tried to rectify by disclosing classified documents shares the same ideology that he fostered through WikiLeaks. That is, an ideology of publicity and exposure that ascertains that democracy rests on citizens performing their dutiful roles as consumers of information, which subsequently inoculates society against any sense of informational satisfaction and incites a contagious paranoia and a system of distrust. This suggests that the ideology, when at work, motivates both the recalcitrant conspiratorial thinker and the neoliberal state citizen. Thus, this particular ideology enables both the construction and deconstruction of a socio-political framework, suggesting that there is a false consciousness to which both sides of the debate over transparency have become susceptible. Assange's desire for transparency elicits

concern for both the political and ethical ramifications of excessive exposure and is indicative of the spectacle-driven society from which both nationalism and anarchism are born, nurtured and engaged in conflict.

In his article, *Spectacles of Resistance and Resistance of Spectacles*, Yiannis Gabriel (2008) states, “whistle blowing is a form of resistance attuned to an era of spectacle, when request for transparency and the cult of the exposé reign supreme” (p. 320). In order to articulate the relationship between spectacle and transparency, Gabriel posits glass at the center of his article as a material representation of society. Glass, according to Gabriel (2008), “is the signature material of our times, just as steel was the signature material of industrial capitalism in its heyday” and it “evokes image and movement just as readily as steel evokes structure and stability” (p. 312). Glass also has the ability to reflect and distort light that passes through it, which in turn distorts and alters images. As a material, it frames and renders certain images worthy of attention (Gabriel, 2008, p. 312). Glass is essentially representative of the spectacle itself and the desire to see, as well as the frame through which society observes and comprehends images.

The most significant attribute of glass is that any and all images perceived through it instantly become mediated. Notions of transparency, purity and honesty are often evoked with glass despite that this material can have bubbles, imperfections, and can be molded in such a way that entirely distorts or refracts any light waves that pass through. The corollary is that the mediating substance and hence, the spectacle itself deserves further scrutiny and critical investigation of its role in performing the transfer of images and information. Thinking alongside Judith Butler’s work in *Frames of War*, Wikileaks unveiled the ways in which the clandestine operations of the government maintained systemic incongruities in socio-economic power. The organization did this by calling into question the frame through which a large part of society

perceived reality prior to the reports that Wikileaks published. In essence, Wikileaks “framed the frame.” However, Gabriel’s assertion that whistle-blowing is well-suited to the present era of spectacle is overshadowed by his claim that “it is also a form of resistance that becomes a spectacle in its own right” (Gabriel, 2008, p. 320). In 2010, WikiLeaks began targeting American government secrecy and has since been swept into the processes of media spectacle itself. Prior to its focus on the U.S., WikiLeaks published thousands of classified documents that disclosed “proof of high-level government corruption and human rights abuses in Kenya; confidential records of one of Iceland’s top banks revealing its role in the country’s financial collapse; [and] details on the hyper-secretive Church of Scientology’s operations” (Sifry, 2011, p. 23). Although the disclosure of such information was not welcomed by the affected state and corporate entities, WikiLeaks notoriety exploded when the organization became a target of the U.S. government for publicizing its possession of over two hundred thousand classified documents from the War in Iraq (now widely referred to as Cablegate). It was at this point that Julian Assange became labeled as a “high-tech terrorist” and a threat to U.S. national security by American Vice President, Joe Biden (MacAskill, 2010). It was also the point at which WikiLeaks consolidated its implication in the ideology of publicity and became a spectacle in and of itself.

In early 2011, Rob Walker from the *New York Times Magazine* wrote in his article, *Branding Transparency*, “a Google image search for WikiLeaks...now calls up not just its logo and pictures of Assange but also images of War, famous politicians, prominent supporters and opponents” (Walker, 2011, p. 22). In its efforts to expose the secrets of organizations that hold the majority of power in the world such as banks, governments and corporations, WikiLeaks has inevitably become implicated in the processes of capitalism. The most salient instance of the organization’s perceived threat to the primary beneficiaries of the capitalist system is seen in the efforts of

Visa, MasterCard, PayPal, Bank of America and other financial businesses and institutions to silence WikiLeaks by disconnecting the organization from any of their money-transfer services. In conjunction with this, the Afghan War and Iraq War documents leak that were part of Cablegate subsequently involved WikiLeaks in the processes of War. In *Afflicted Powers*, Retort (2005) suggests that the processes of capitalism and War are not so divergent and that in fact, these processes intersect at the point of spectacle. Retort's argument thus serves to corroborate the proposition that WikiLeaks has become a form of spectacle in and of itself.

Retort (2005) suggests that the interconnections between capital, spectacle and War are most profoundly evident in the context of the events that happened after 9/11. In Retort's investigation, Debord's theories of the spectacle are relevant to the contemporary analysis of the political and economic processes involved in the War. Images and violence have become the means through which primitive accumulation is made possible. In an audacious metaphor for the neoliberal militarism that Retort suggests has become the driving force of the North American economy, they claim that "ultimately, the spectacle comes out of the barrel of a gun" (Retort, 2005, p. 131). Through this claim, the writers indicate that violence is an inherent quality of the spectacle in the sense that it is "a repeated action against real human possibilities, real (meaning flexible, useable, transformable) representations, [and] real attempts at collectivity" (Retort, 2005, p. 131). Political efficacy is thus expounded through images. The spectacle is employed to cloak the violence that underscores the measures involved in sustaining capitalist powers and to hide the fact that it is "state power that informs and enforces it" (Retort, 2005, p. 131). While spectacle in this sense serves as a mechanism of hiding, or perhaps distracting society from seeing the way state power functions through the processes of capitalism and War, WikiLeaks conversely tries to reveal these processes. In a sense, WikiLeaks and American state power

have become engaged in a complicated game of hide and seek that seems to have no apparent end in sight. While both sides oppose each other, in the sense that the state hides and WikiLeaks – or more generally, the transparency movement – ostensibly seeks, both are part of the same game, the same spectacle and inevitably sustain the game/spectacle in their obstinate desire to defeat each other.

To suggest that WikiLeaks is engaged in a game of hide and seek with the state is to claim that the efforts of the state to enforce a spectacle that functions to hide and preserve processes of militarized neoliberalism have not been thoroughly successful. Hence, the spectacle is not just “a key form of social control in present circumstances, but also a source of ongoing instability,” whereby power relations are in constant flux (Retort, 2005, p. 188). Retort indicates that this instability has allowed several movements of opposition to the present “texture of modernity” to manifest, such as the opposition to American bases (Retort, 2005, p. 189) and the challenge to secrecy (Retort, 2005, p. 190). From here, Julian Assange’s ambitions to fill the entire *intellectual record* can be revisited to propose that it is the exploitation of the unstable spectacle and the reframing of the reality designed by the state that he strives to achieve through WikiLeaks and the exposure of government and corporate secrets.

The instability of the spectacle elicits the notion of reframing, which is made possible by the reproducibility and circulation of information and images. Judith Butler conceptualizes the frame as that which “actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality” (Butler, xiii). However, in this attempt to contain that, which will count as reality, it also always, “throwing something away, always keeping something out” and therefore always implicitly providing the grounds for resistance (Butler, 2009, p. xiii). Through this relationship between the parts of reality that have been framed and the parts

that have been jettisoned from the frame, opposition is possible. WikiLeaks was created by Assange to encourage and enforce this opposition to the reality framed by the state through images – images that are primarily rendered through photography. Judith Butler describes the power of photography and its ability “to construct national identity itself” (Butler, 2009, p. 72) and acknowledges the recognition of this by the United States in the publicity of the War in Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, photography has become a significant aspect of embedded reporting, which the U.S. has employed as a means to control the perceptual field of society’s impression of the War. Butler explains the function of embedded reporting as a means to maintain state support by “interpreting in advance what will and will not be included in the field of perception...illustrating the orchestrative power of the state to ratify what will be called reality: the extent of what is perceived to exist” (Butler, 2009, p. 66). Assange has, in some sense, caught on to the fact that not everything is included in the image of reality disseminated by the state, and that this indicates that there is information being left out. This is where Assange would reaffirm the necessity of filling the *intellectual record* with information that has been intentionally excluded. The information that gets relayed to American audiences through embedded reporting and photography is part of the reality that the state has attempted to isolate within the elusive frame. However, Butler goes on to explain that the delimiting frame is unstable, as Retort also indicates in the context of the spectacle.

The ability for information to always exceed the frame alludes to the potential of photographs to, “change their meaning depending on the context in which they are shown and the purpose for which they are invoked” (Butler, 80 year?). Prior to Cablegate, the spread of the Abu Ghraib photos in 2006 incited opposition to the War through its evidence of torture and War crimes being committed by the American military. Confidence in the War began to wane as

the image of Lynndie England holding a leash attached to a prisoner, along with many others, circulated in the media. Butler claims that the ethical response of outrage to the War incited by the Abu Ghraib photos suggested “a break from the norm governing the subject of rights [had] taken place and that something called ‘humanity’ [was] at issue” (Butler, 2009, p. 78). Butler’s investigation highlights the precarious nature of humans as the vehicle where affect is made possible, and through which photographs of torture and violence can elicit rage and contestation. In highlighting the impact of the Abu Ghraib photos from 2006, it can be noted that there was already evidence that the frame had shifted and that North American audiences were already reframing the reality constructed by the U.S. for the sake of the War. This raises concerns regarding the controversy that manifested around information that was later leaked in Cablegate in 2010.

In *WikiLeaks and the Age of Transparency*, Micah L. Sifry (2011) quotes Private Bradley Manning who was detained at Guantanamo Bay in 2010 for leaking the Cablegate U.S. military documents to WikiLeaks: “I want people to see the truth...regardless of who they are...because without information, you cannot make informed decisions as a public” (Sifry, 2011, p. 37). Manning, who used WikiLeaks to disclose private information regarding the War in Iraq, makes an important case for the ostensible link between visibility and truth. Rather than wanting people to “understand” or “know” the truth, Manning claimed he wanted people to “see” the truth. His claim suggests that information is the key to seeing the truth, and moreover, that disclosing *secret* information will reveal the truth. While being restricted from information can certainly impede the public’s ability to understand particular realities of the War, the sudden ability to see secret information does not necessarily lead to any new truths.

Ariella Azoulay, in *The Civil Contract of Photography*, explores truth in the context of photography and its ability to manifest a citizenship that transcends sovereignty and state citizenship. Azoulay (2008) believes in what she calls the citizenry of photography, in which individuals who are sovereign citizens or who have been stripped of their state citizenship, all become equal citizens through the act of photography. For Azoulay, the civil contract of photography, “organizes social relations without the mediation of a sovereign, the place of the sovereign overtaken by the consensual social attitude toward the truth in photography” (Azoulay, 2008, p. 127). In its ability to speak the truth, photography enables pictures to become powerful social, cultural and political instruments (Azoulay, 2008, p. 129). The power of photography to speak the truth and to embody anyone involved in its processes as its citizen indicates an aesthetic function that seeks to rectify injustices performed by governing and oppressive powers through the revealing of social relations. However, Azoulay is cautious of falling into the trap of perceiving the field of vision as consisting only of binary oppositions such as open or closed or more specifically, what appears in the field of vision and what is excluded from it. Azoulay claims that this simplified opposition produces the “false illusion that the disclosure of more and more images of the horror [that the ruling apparatus] is perpetrating might bring about its end” (Azoulay, 2008, p. 420). Azoulay also cautions that “removing the social prohibition of the visible will not lead to full visibility” and that perhaps the “passion for such visibility is precisely what thwarts the eye from seeing what is visible on the surface” (Azoulay, 2008, p. 287). These two caveats provided by Azoulay infer that the logic behind the actions of Private Bradley Manning, Julian Assange, and other proponents of transparency, may not necessarily be as tenable as they claim.

While the argument tends to fall along the lines of the need for accountability and trust within the system, the insistence that complete exposure or visibility will provide all the

information that one needs to know, or that it will motivate change, is a naïve, inchoate and paranoid frame of thought. With the mind set to inform the masses, to show them the truth, and to instill the belief that this is what needs to happen in order to begin forming a transparent government, Bradley Manning and Julian Assange have yet to do anything more than enforce a rhetoric of fear and distrust. In conjunction with this, WikiLeaks has yet to publish any real surprises about anything. The abundance of documents leaked in Cablegate that brought about headlines like *Collateral Damage* was in fact just that – an abundance of documents. Regarding the content of the documents, little more was discussed beyond the stories written by media outlets like the *New York Times* or *The Guardian*, with whom Julian Assange had colluded in order to publically circulate details in the documents. Assange's collusion with the *New York Times* highlighted his attempt to construct a particular frame around information that he felt was worthy of dissemination. Thus, his original efforts to challenge the framing of reality performed by the state became undermined by his own fixation on generating a frame that directly opposed that of the state's version. In this way, Assange's ideal to include every piece of hidden information in the frame, and then selectively publish information with a narrative component further implicated WikiLeaks in the processes of capitalism and spectacle.

While Assange claimed that the *intellectual record* must be filled with information that is being suppressed, this has yet to consist of anything more than disclosing troves of classified government documents on the Internet that have shown the public that innocent people have been raped, robbed and murdered. These are truths indeed, but are not new. To Assange's credit, the ways in which these acts took place may be interpreted as new information. Despite that the information that has been revealed thus far in Cablegate is of little surprise to anyone, Assange, along with other conspiratorial thinkers, seems to still be motivated by a desire to control and

steer a certain element of surprise by eliminating secrets or the ostensibly “unknown.” Slavoj Žižek put it most succinctly when he wrote: “The only surprising thing about WikiLeaks revelations is that they contain no surprises” (Žižek, 2011). To that extent, Julian Assange has demonstrated that perhaps his desire for transparency is indicative of a paranoia that is characterized by a fear of surprises. In her investigation of paranoid reading, Eve Sedgwick suggests that because “the first imperative of paranoia is there must be no bad surprises,” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 130) it subsequently (irrationally) “places its faith in exposure” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 138). Sedgwick’s thoughts on paranoia are unremarkably fitting for elucidating the pathology that emanates from WikiLeaks and its creator.

Even if the *intellectual record*, as it were, included all the information that Julian Assange and other whistleblowers identified as “suppressed”, there will always be a limit to the knowledge and information obtained. If this movement were to continue growing in size and power, it is likely that the paranoia would only grow proportionately as well. In this regard, a particular mentality would continue to permeate and influence the public sphere, which follows the line of thinking of “the more information we have, the less we think we have” (Dean, 2002, p. 43). Furthermore, the ethical framework involved in Assange’s goal for transparency seems to only extend as far as wiping names from the records and documents that are set to be published. Tim Berners Lee also noted that it has not occurred to proponents of the transparency movement that “what happened recently on WikiLeaks was that somebody stole information, somebody had privileged access to information, betrayed the trust put in them in their job, and took information which should not have been, according to their employer, released, and they released it” (Howard, 2010). This perspective of thinking about the transparency movement has perhaps been obfuscated by the

overwhelming notion that freedom of speech is a flexible right that can be construed as the “public’s right to know”.

Assange’s creation of WikiLeaks was not inspired by an inquiry into what knowledge does or can do, as Sedgwick asks in *Touching Feeling*. Assange provides evidence in his responses to Hans Ulrich that it is less about an inquiry of knowledge and information, and more of a challenge of power. Specifically, Assange states that as a child, he, “always wanted to overcome barriers” and that once he began “breaking systems that were used to hide information in government computers,” he felt liberated (Ulrich, 2011, p. 2). It must also be acknowledged that the WikiLeaks organization evolved significantly since its launch. Micah Sifry notes that the first model of WikiLeaks consisted of solely raw data that was published on its website, which then evolved into a tighter editorial style that was evident in the production and promotion of the *Collateral Murder* video and website (Sifry, 2011, p. 173). The final model of the organization that governed its processes up until the project was put on hold in 2011, consisted of deals being made with “major media on the timing of data releases” (Sifry, 2011, p. 173). WikiLeaks began as an anonymous organization that published raw data, to a symbol (consisting of Assange’s identity) of the transparency movement and a partner with major news corporations. Rather than maintaining its role as a conduit for the anonymous data dumping of leaked information, WikiLeaks evolved into a source of information from the past that was revamped into the latest scandal.

Thus, WikiLeaks has done little to incite change, and has in many ways only perpetuated the current socio-political system that relies on and functions through the spectacle and exposure. The transparency movement’s desire to reinstate real democracy and restore trust in the government system seems to have only manifested further distrust in an increasingly paranoid society. The system of exposing secrets in

hopes that it might shame the government into changing its ways also seems to be backfiring at an alarming rate. In his article, *Frozen Scandal*, Mark Danner explicates the current phenomenon of the frozen scandal, whereby its purpose is to provide the illusion of movement and the potential for change, in bringing audiences new news that shocks and excites. The reality of the scandal, however, is that nothing ever changes and what happens in actuality is, “the story [is] converted from shocking crime into perpetual news then minor story, and then, at last ‘key issue’” (Danner, 2008, p. 3). Consequently, governments, corporations and other sources of power that control the majority of socio-economic wealth are becoming resistant to shame, as the scandal always subsides and becomes old news. Perhaps even at this moment, it is evident that this process is at work given that the scandal of Assange’s alleged sexual abuse crimes (Ulrich, 2011), which received ample exposure, has not made headlines in quite some time. In all of his attempts to incriminate the U.S. government for its War crimes and its secrets, Assange has become the poster boy himself for scandal and a living testament of the ability for the omnipresent powers of spectacle, capitalism and War to subsume the ultimate symbol of resistance and hope for a more just society.

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