WikiLeaks and Hacktivist Culture

by PETER LUDLOW

In recent months there has been considerable discussion about the WikiLeaks phenomenon, and understandably so, given the volume and sensitivity of the documents the website has released. What this discussion has revealed, however, is that the media and government agencies believe there is a single protagonist to be concerned with—something of a James Bond villain, if you will—when in fact the protagonist is something altogether different: an informal network of revolutionary individuals bound by a shared ethic and culture.

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According to conventional wisdom, the alleged protagonist is, of course, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange, and the discussion of him has ranged from Raffi Khatchadourian's June portrait in *The New Yorker*, which makes Assange sound like a master spy in a John le Carré novel, to Tunku Varadarajan's epic ad hominem bloviation in *The Daily Beast*: "With his bloodless, sallow face, his lank hair drained of all color, his languorous, very un-Australian limbs, and his aura of blinding pallor that appears to admit no nuance, Assange looks every inch the amoral, uber-nerd villain."

Some have called for putting Assange "out of business" (even if we must violate international law to do it), while others, ranging from Daniel Ellsberg to Assange himself, think he is (in Ellsberg's words) "in some danger." I don't doubt that Assange is in danger, but even if he is put out of business by arrest, assassination or character impeachment with charges of sexual misconduct, it would not stanch the flow of secret documents into the public domain. To think otherwise is an error that reflects a colossal misunderstanding of the nature of WikiLeaks and the subculture from which it emerged.

WikiLeaks is not the one-off creation of a solitary genius; it is the product of decades of collaborative work by people engaged in applying computer hacking to political causes, in particular, to the principle that information-hoarding is evil—and, as Stewart Brand said in 1984, "Information wants to be free." Today there is a broad spectrum of people engaged in this cause, so that were Assange to be eliminated today, WikiLeaks would doubtless continue, and even if WikiLeaks were somehow to be eliminated, new sites would emerge to replace it.

Let's begin by considering whether it is possible to take WikiLeaks offline, as called for in the *Washington Post* by former Bush speechwriter Marc Thiessen, who added that "taking [Assange] off the streets is not enough; we must also recover the documents he unlawfully possesses and disable the system he has built to illegally disseminate classified information."

Consider the demand that we "recover the documents." Even the documents that have not been made public by WikiLeaks are widely distributed all over the Internet. WikiLeaks has released an encrypted 1.4 gigabyte file called "insurance.aes256." If something happens to Assange, the password to the encrypted file will be released (presumably via a single Twitter tweet). What's in the file? We don't know, but at 1.4 gigabytes, it is nineteen times the size of the Afghan war log that was recently distributed to major newspapers. Legendary hacker Kevin Poulsen speculates that the file "is doubtless in the hands of thousands, if not tens of thousands, of netizens already."

It's also a bit difficult to "disable the system," since WikiLeaks did not need to create a new network; the group simply relied on existing electronic communications networks (e.g., the Internet) and the fact that there are tens of thousands of like-minded people all over the world. Where did all those like-minded people come from? Are they all under the spell of Assange? To the contrary, they were active long before Assange sat down to hack his first computer.

It has long been an ethical principle of hackers that ideas and information are not to be hoarded but are to be shared. In 1984, when Assange turned 13, Steven Levy described this attitude in his book *Hackers*. After interviewing a number of hackers, he distilled a "hacker ethic," which included, among others, the following two maxims: (1) all information should be free; (2) mistrust authority and promote decentralization.

These sentiments were poetically expressed by a hacker named The Mentor, in an essay titled "The Conscience of a Hacker." It was written shortly after his arrest, and appeared in the important hacker publication *Phrack* in 1986.

> We explore…and you call us criminals. We seek after knowledge…and you call us criminals. We exist without skin color, without nationality, without religious bias…and you call us criminals. You build atomic bombs, you wage wars, you murder, cheat, and lie to us and try to make us believe it's for our own good, yet we're the criminals. Yes, I am a criminal. My crime is that of curiosity. My crime is that of judging people by what they say and think, not what they look like. My crime is that of outsmarting you, something that you will never forgive me for. I am a hacker, and this is my manifesto. You may stop this individual, but you can't stop us all.

Indeed, you can't stop them all. One year after The Mentor's manifesto was published, Assange acquired a modem and entered cyberspace for the first time. In the quarter-century since, that basic hacker philosophy has not been abandoned,

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and indeed has evolved into a broad cultural movement. Hacker conferences with thousands of attendees have sprung up in places ranging from Amsterdam and New York to Las Vegas and Abu Dhabi, and small weekly hacker meetups are routine in every major city in the world.

For many hackers, this activity has taken a decidedly political turn—into what is sometimes called hacktivism. Hacktivism is the application of information technologies (and the hacking of them) to political action. This has ranged from simple website defacings and attempts to unbottle secret information to efforts to ensure the privacy of ordinary citizens by providing them military-grade encryption (a successful mission of the infamous Cypherpunks).

Hacktivism has been extended to political action against all manner of power structures. One of the earliest examples is the Hong Kong Blondes—a group that disrupted computer networks in China in the 1990s so people could get access to blocked websites. The Hong Kong Blondes were in turn assisted by a Texas-based hacker group called the Cult of the Dead Cow (cDc), which helped them with advanced encryption technology. In 2006 the cDc subsequently waged a PR campaign against Google (calling it Goolag) when Google caved in to Chinese censorship demands. Their slogan: "Goolag: Exporting censorship, one search at a time."

Examples of hacktivism by other groups have included denizens of the rowdy, transgressive and scatological 4Chan website, operating under the name Anonymous, in its assault on attempted censorship by the Church of Scientology, using a series of denial-of-service attacks against Scientology websites. Anonymous also moved against the Iranian government during the 2009 elections, when it established a website that shared information from inside Iran and provided advice to Iranian activists on how to encrypt and safely transmit communications. Another notable example is a group of Portuguese hackers called Urban Ka0s, which protested the Indonesian government's treatment of East Timor by hacking Indonesian government websites in the 1990s and posting alternative pages that protested the government's policies.

The political compass of these hacktivist groups has never pointed true right or true left—at least by our typical way of charting the political landscape. They have been consistently unified in their adherence to the basic hacker principles as outlined by Levy and The Mentor in the 1980s: information should not be hoarded by powerful constituencies—it needs to be placed in the hands of the general public. This principle is followed even to the point of threatening to become a "foolish consistency"—as in the recent document dump from WikiLeaks, which drew the rebuke of five human rights organizations, including Amnesty International, because, they felt, civilian sources were not adequately protected.

As described in Khatchadourian's *New Yorker* profile, Assange's philosophy blends in seamlessly with the hacktivist tradition: it can't be characterized in terms of left versus right so much as individual versus institution. In particular, Assange holds that truth, creativity, etc. are corrupted by institutional hierarchies, or what he calls "patronage networks," and that much of illegitimate power is perpetuated by the hoarding of information.

Meanwhile, in a profile of Army Pvt. Bradley Manning, the man accused of leaking documents to WikiLeaks, the *New York Times* considered many explanations for what Manning did. He was troubled because "classmates made fun of him for being gay"; he was "ignored" by his superiors; he was "self-medicating." Curiously elided was what Manning actually said his motivation was. In a May 25 conversation, the hacker Adrian Lamo asked Manning why he gave the information to WikiLeaks when he could have sold it to Russia or China and "made bank." Manning replied in true hacktivist fashion, "Because it's public data…it belongs in the public domain…information should be free…if it's out in the open…it should [do the] public good."

The traditional media, governments and their security organizations just cannot get unglued from the idea that there must be a single mastermind behind an operation like WikiLeaks. While this model works great in fictional dramas, it does not track what is really happening. This is not a one-man or even one-group operation. It is a network of thousands motivated by a shared hacktivist culture and ethic. And with or without Assange, it is not going away. ■

Letters

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has spawned has prevailed with no discernible positive effect for the students it proposed to help. As Diane Ravitch accurately points out in her article ["Why I Changed My Mind," June 14], the rise in accountability through high-stakes testing has resulted in a "measure and punish" approach that radically narrows the curriculum, affecting students and teachers alike. Now with even fewer resources at our disposal, we are at last being asked to reignite the imaginations of a generation of educators to engage, inspire and educate our youth. The challenges of creating a bridge to brighter landscapes are welcome, but the designated pathways are full of pot holes.

A positive offered by Race to the Top and the new focus on creativity and research is the opportunity to share successful practice. In Alameda County we are proud of our ability to put in place some of the exciting models of excellence mentioned by Pedro Noguera: schools as service centers; partnerships with higher education and business as pathways to college and careers; and comprehensive curriculums that include arts and civic engagement.

Sheila Jordan
Alameda County superintendent of schools

Do Do That Voodoo That You Do So Well

Baltimore

In 1980, when Bush the elder referred to Reagan's "trickle-down" theory as "voodoo economics," he was making the legitimate point that the theory was nonsense. But Voodoo (or Voudon) is no more nonsense than Christianity, Buddhism or Zoroastrianism. It is the name of a syncretic religion with African animist and Catholic roots, practiced by some Haitians. It's disrespectful to use the term [Jordan Stancil, "Europe's Voodoo Economics," June 28].

Ed Morman