



True Confessions: WikiLeaks, Contested Truths, and Narrative Containment

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In the dog days of summer 2012, the British newspaper *The Guardian* published a collection of statements entitled “Who Is Julian Assange? By the People Who Know Him Best.” And, indeed, people ranging from his mother and school chums to editors and activist-colleagues weighed in, recalling their interactions with him and providing anecdotes and insights. *The Guardian’s* editors, like the reporters in *Citizen Kane*, presumably hoped that the parts would add up to a whole. Interest in Assange has been unrelenting and has largely overshadowed the documents that WikiLeaks released. In a spiral of synecdochal reference, WikiLeaks had become Assange, and Assange had become the story. Although one might chalk this up to the mass news organizations’ predilection for personality, or to the tabloidization of culture, or to Assange’s own attempts at self-promotion, the question of “Who is Julian Assange?” in light of WikiLeaks’ controversial work and, in particular, its 2010 and 2011 release of confidential U.S. military and diplomatic documents, seems a very odd one. The shocking nature of some of the released documents together with the systematic transgressions and duplicity they revealed on the part of the U.S. government seemed to offer far more compelling stories—and for a while, they competed with Assange’s narrative for media attention. Indisputable evidence documented the sordid side of ongoing affairs of state, from diplomacy to espionage to war. Whether inscribed as realpolitik, incompetence, or malfeasance, the leaks offered a historically unparalleled look at (among other things) the behind-the-scenes operations of the U.S. government. But somehow, through it all, Assange’s name kept reemerging in the headlines.

I open with this observation because the unfolding of the larger WikiLeaks discussion—the revelations, their ethical framing as transgressive or as a much-needed tonic, the people and ideas behind the leaks, and the parsing out of the leaks across time and across national borders—offers an opportunity to reflect on the construction of public narratives, complete with notions of agency, motive, and the selective inclusion (and exclusion) of data. In the WikiLeaks case, it is more accurate to speak of a web of sometimes-conflicting narratives, with various parties attempting to shape and control the dominant narrative. I use the term *narrative* in both a loose way, to refer to the unfolding of a serialized drama that various parties attempted to frame, and in a narrow sense, drawing on some concepts from literary theory to help illuminate the dynamics of the WikiLeaks drama as it unfolded in the public arena. This endeavor requires two provisos. First, my interest in the narrative form and dynamics of the WikiLeaks saga is driven by an interest in why the substance of the leaks, both the transgressions and the inconsistencies

they revealed regarding the larger issue of secrecy in an open democracy, did not lead to outrage and action. Second, I am aware that some of the ideas that I will draw on were developed for analyzing fictional worlds, not the real world; but our culture has long operated in the borderlands of the fictional, and narrative as a representational convention is ambivalent about its domain of operation. Narrative conventions offer legibility, allowing us quickly to emplot new happenings into familiar patterns; and the more familiar the pattern, the more reassuring (even if not necessarily correct) the outcome. I invoke these ideas in the spirit of heuristic inquiry.

Transnational Franchises

Since it first made headlines, the WikiLeaks story has been cast in multiple and shifting narrative form. Competing notions of agency, motives, implications, and the story's moral have struggled for dominance, at least within the U.S. media system, hewing largely toward the structures of predictable ideological master narratives and the counternarratives offered by critics of the system. But despite the considerable effort expended by the U.S. government and its institutional allies in the conservative media establishment to control the story, it managed for a time to keep slipping its bounds. Neither governmental pressure nor the journalistic conventions that usually tame breaking news and subdue it into the patterns of the familiar were initially effective in stabilizing the narrative.

Several factors account for the instability of the WikiLeaks narrative particularly during 2010: the continuous and systematic release of leaks, guaranteeing that the story stayed on front pages, which triggered new rounds of partisan response; the very different meanings and implications of the leaks in various national settings, where U.S. diplomatic cables revealed inconsistencies in local political knowledge and served as fodder for local political debate; and the range of stories generated in both the quality and tabloid press, from reports on diplomatic cables to other nations' responses to speculation regarding Julian Assange's behavior. In the United States, these elements played out in a setting characterized by unparalleled levels of governmental secrecy and an attendant culture of paranoia, WikiLeaks' adept use of the Internet to disseminate information widely and quickly, and the public's and press's ability to access different versions of the unfolding events through the online global press.¹ A fitful reverberation ensued. Like the arcade game Whac-a-Mole, no sooner was one cycle of stories deflected or contained than a new story would pop up thanks to leaked diplomatic cables embarrassing to one ally or another, or leaked military cables destabilizing the work of the Pentagon's public relations department. These events would spiral into stories of their own beyond U.S. borders, only to ultimately force themselves upon the U.S. media through the repercussions they provoked.

Reporting and cross-referencing by the global quality press, in part, sustained the chain reactions of leaks and the ensuing stories, national responses, and diplomatic damage control. *The New York Times*, *Le Monde*, *El Pais*, *The Guardian*, and *Der Spiegel* among them, these news organizations focused on their own national sites of interest, at the same time picking up one another's lead stories regarding the leaks

¹ One indicator of the context, the U.S. Information Security Oversight Office's *2011 Annual Report to the President*, showed that officials created more than 92 million classified documents—the most ever and 16 million more than the previous year.

and whatever fallout they generated, effectively pushing the stories both across borders and through repeated news cycles. At the time, this read simply like a resurgent story that the U.S. government could not contain, but in retrospect, it looks more like a series of transnational adaptations of the same basic narrative, but with clearly defined local variations and, at times, even narrative sequencing. Following what *The Guardian* characterized as David Leigh's "inadvertent" release of the WikiLeaks' decryption code for its cache of diplomatic cables, and, therefore, the unfiltered release of the cables themselves, a WikiLeaks editorial revealed the organization's now disrupted strategic choreography of narrative elements:

WikiLeaks has been releasing U.S. diplomatic cables according to a carefully laid out plan to stimulate profound changes. . . . The WikiLeaks method involves a sophisticated procedure of packaging leaked US diplomatic cables up into country groups or themes, such as "resources corruption," and providing it to those organizations that agreed to do the most research in exchange for time-limited exclusivity. As part of the WikiLeaks agreement, these groups, using their local knowledge, remove the names of persons reporting unjust acts to US embassies, and feed the results back to WikiLeaks. WikiLeaks then publishes, simultaneously with its partners, the underlying cables together with the politically explosive revelations. ("Global," 2011, para. 5–6)

Until the release of the decryption code in late 2010, WikiLeaks seemed to be in control of the narrative, maximizing its column inches and keeping its stories in play. Close alliance with the international quality press assured that its leaks could be cast as responsible acts of journalism; working across national borders assured that stories would be driven by local interest but have international consequence; and the steady release of documents assured that, like a good serial, the story would enjoy longevity by keeping people waiting for the next installment rather than ending with clear narrative resolution.

An Unreliable Narrator

The term *unreliable narrator* comes from literary theory and refers to a narrator who cannot be trusted, and whose telling permits great slippage between what is true in the diegetic universe and what isn't (Booth, 1961). In the case of WikiLeaks, the term seems relevant for several reasons. First, in essence, the leaks demonstrated that the public posture of the U.S. government, whether its declarations regarding military or diplomatic affairs, were duplicitous. The narratives authored by the U.S. Departments of State and Defense and circulated to the press and diplomatic partners were undercut by confidential reports that gave evidence of their real motives and actions.

Second, the government, for its part unable to contest the credibility of the leaked documents and unable to thwart the distribution potentials of the Internet and the resonator effect of the international press, embarked on a strategy of personalizing WikiLeaks, equating it with Julian Assange, and then showing that Assange was the unreliable narrator. A man of dubious motive, a loner, a hacker, a rapist, an attention seeker, a fugitive from justice—Assange was cast in many roles by those critical of the leaks, and in many cases, those characterizations had the effect of overshadowing the leaks themselves and of recasting their release into the irresponsible acts of a malcontent bent on doing wrong. The

rhetorical posture of WikiLeaks as a whistleblower (itself a term that suggests duplicity) seeking to expose the criminal activities of those working for the state was shown to be a mere facade, masking the real motives of a deeply troubled individual. This recalls the apocryphal tale of *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920), in which the studio allegedly imposed a narrative frame on the film's tale of power gone mad: The teller of such a tale can himself only be mad, because power, after all, is benevolent.

Third, Julian Assange seems eagerly to have picked up on this strategy, in turn recasting particularly the Swedish rape investigation directed on him into a U.S.-backed plot ultimately to extradite him to the United States. Here again, the reliability of the surface narrating agency—whether the women who brought forward the complaint or the legal representatives who pursued it—was undercut by a reframing strategy that rendered it unreliable. In this case, Assange and his supporters effectively looped back the charge of unreliable narration to the U.S. (and British and Swedish) government and Assange's accusers, inscribing them within a similar pattern of duplicitous behaviors as exposed by the leaks.

These contorted attempts at narrative reframing have kept the news media focused on the tellers of the story rather than the story told. And in this scenario, the advantage fell quickly to the government and its backers, since WikiLeaks, correctly or not, was personified by Assange, whereas the government and the media sympathetic to it were not only difficult to embody, but even attempting to link such amorphous entities as the government and the press already assumed a critical ideological stance. Throughout much of 2010, while WikiLeaks could control the pacing of its releases and work hand-in-hand with the international quality press, it had an effective counterstrategy, aligning itself with and speaking through established institutional storytellers, and providing the utterances of the government itself (the cables, military documents, etc). Once that relationship broke down and the cables were released en masse, the ground shifted considerably, denying WikiLeaks the protective cover of the press, relieving the press and public of the dramatic tension of waiting for the next episode, and putting the larger issue of the reliability of the narrator front and center.

Agency

What happened, whose action was involved, and how can we characterize it? *Agency* can be a complicated term, with epistemic, linguistic, and narrative implications, particularly in cases like the events surrounding WikiLeaks, in which all three are closely bound up with one another. Is this a story of improper—even criminal—governmental behavior? Does it turn on the revelation of covered-up incidents of friendly fire, of secret and illegal prisons, of duplicitous behaviors toward the Red Cross and diplomatic partners? Or is it a story of treasonous behavior, the theft and illegal release of classified state documents to the world, and the reckless endangerment of diplomatic relations as well as real people's lives? Is it a story of criminal neglect, of governmental agencies unable to enforce internal security and unwilling, when asked, to screen the documents in question to protect their own operatives? Or is it a story of a new turn in journalism: freeing the old gatekeepers from the constraints of nation; wedding the press's materiality to the ephemeral and instantaneous capabilities of the Internet; and transforming investigative journalism in the computer age, where data can be compromised on a massive scale? Each of these characterizations—and more—suggests quite different stories, notions of agency, and, of course, implication.

Uncertainty over precisely what happened, compounded by the unreliability of the narrator, has kept the WikiLeaks story from solidifying. Particularly in an era marked by sharp ideological divisions and outspoken mistrust over news sources, this instability played out against radically different grounds, each version of the narrative proving quite different points to different constituencies. Given the dynamics of these interpretive frames, the short history of WikiLeaks and the U.S. government suggests two strategies capable of partially stabilizing the story, even if leaving the interpretation of that story up for grabs. One was WikiLeaks' controlled and regular release of data in various national settings—a strategy that kept the story fresh and kept its audiences awaiting the next episode to be revealed. In this case, despite competing notions of agency, at least the issue of narrative reliability was temporarily superseded by the flow of new documents and the various national reactions they triggered. The other strategy, only possible after WikiLeaks lost control of the data, focused precisely on the issue of the narrator's reliability. In this case, Assange's synecdochal relationship to the WikiLeaks organization—a relationship both imposed by his enemies and embraced by Assange—offered a tangible target on which to focus discussion. By contrast, the government and the press remained abstractions, difficult to characterize and legible only to those already armed with a critical perspective. Parties from the various ideological camps would certainly continue to disagree about the various framings of Assange, but he had become the *de facto* center of attention, not the leaks and what they revealed about the state of governance.

Looking Ahead

Rarely does a story enjoy the longevity, transnational variation, or range of interpretation demonstrated by the saga of WikiLeaks and its release of U.S. documents. Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the WikiLeaks organization was how to translate information into stories, data into meaningful scenarios complete with options for action. Its ongoing release of data precluded the establishment of an easily containable master narrative. Quality and tabloid press outlets alike were forced, by the logics of the industry, to keep up with the news, particularly since the pace of the data releases was often too fast for assimilation and containment. The significance of the releases to various national partners—and the internal political debates they provoked and that spilled into the media in countries from Tunisia to The Netherlands to Israel—transformed the leaked cables into powerful stories, complete with diplomatic twists not always anticipated in the U.S. media. Like the pace of the leaks, these nationally encoded narratives kept the events unfolding and before the public, defying attempts to contain and suppress them.

In 2012, the question of "Who is Julian Assange?" predominated in the mainstream media, with the quality press largely converging around the traditional concerns of the tabloid market, with the "who" rather than the "what." This is not to say that the documents were leaked in vain, for they continue to be productively mined by various interest groups and academics. But for the mass media that trade in stories, the leaks have slipped back to being mere data, while Assange has shifted forward as a site of interest.

Narrative logics can shed light on the public shaping of phenomena such as WikiLeaks, including demonstrating techniques for their suppression as well as their successful transmission. In this regard, an underappreciated dimension of WikiLeaks' work can be found in its generally successful attempts to cull

through massive volumes of information and to selectively position data across both time and cultural and institutional space in such a way as to construct an ongoing narrative. That it could do this in a generally hostile press environment (in the United States, at any rate) is all the more striking. As with any good story, desire—the desire to know more, or to know what happened next, or to know why—sustained interest from one leak to the next, keeping the story in motion and the unfolding events before the public. However, as the WikiLeaks leak and subsequent availability of all files demonstrates, the general availability of information rather than its strategic release is no guarantor of interest, no creator of desire. It is a resource, daunting both in scale and political implication. And in this context, true confessions emerges as a reliably familiar and popular alternative genre—one capable of filling the void, circumventing hard realities, and serving the status quo. The story now turns on the leaker, not the leaked, to the detriment of the public sphere.

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