

The Rise of Pro-Democracy Journalism

The old idea of journalism arming the people with facts they need for democracy to work has been betrayed by major U.S. news outlets, like the New York Times and Washington Post, which have instead aligned themselves with national power under the guise of “objectivity.” But Nozomi Hayase sees the Internet as a more democratic hope.

By Nozomi Hayase

July 18, 2011

There is much controversy over the future of journalism. The discourse surrounding WikiLeaks in its relation to traditional media has become the eye of the storm.

Both the New York Times and The Guardian have come out strongly critical of WikiLeaks and Julian Assange. Bill Keller, executive editor of the New York Times has refused to refer to Assange as a journalist.

In an interview on PBS, Keller described Assange as an activist with an agenda to promote, carrying an ideology of transparency, claiming that his aim is to embarrass the U.S. government. Recently, Keller’s view on this topic has shifted a bit. He came close to admitting WikiLeaks is a journalistic entity.

Yet, he distanced himself from the non-profit whistle-blower site, saying “it still wasn’t ‘my kind of news organization,’ and that if Assange was acting as a journalist, ‘I don’t regard him as a kindred spirit, he’s not the kind of journalist I am’” [as cited in Ingram, 2011].

There are various possible motives at work here. American mainstream media’s lack of support and even hostility towards WikiLeaks could indicate simple jealousy of WikiLeaks’ accomplishments and also may come from sensing a threat to the familiar way of practicing “journalism.”

Yet, the debate surrounding WikiLeaks’ status as a journalistic organization and the question of whether First Amendment protections cover the unauthorized release of sensitive or secret government documents bring out a larger issue. It urges us to reexamine what freedom of speech and the press really is.

The First Amendment of the United States:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the

government for a redress of grievances.

Attorney Jonathon Peters wrote in his article titled "WikiLeaks, The First Amendment, and the Press," that "The First Amendment does not belong to the press. It protects the expressive rights of all speakers, sometimes on the basis of the Speech Clause and sometimes on the basis of the Press Clause."

In a representative democracy, it is vital for citizens to be vigilant and aware of the actions of their government and aware that they are free to speak. This is different from a monarchy where the authority comes from the centralized throne of a King.

The First Amendment was meant to bring a new balance of power between citizens and the government, particularly as a check on the executive branch. It gives ordinary people power to challenge the gap in power between those who are in a position of the official authority and the "governed" on the street.

Those who govern are meant to be in service to the best interests of the general populace. It is therefore both a right and also a responsibility in a democracy for individuals to engage as watchdogs against abuse of power.

The First Amendment as a whole is meant to safeguard that role, encouraging communication between citizens and governments to move toward dialogue rather than monologue.

Peters brings out a question unique to the case of WikiLeaks:

To argue that the First Amendment would protect Assange and WikiLeaks only if they are part of the press is to assume (1) that the Speech Clause would not protect them, and (2) that there is a major difference between the Speech and Press Clauses. (Peters, 2011)

Journalists share the right of free speech and press with ordinary people as they themselves are citizens. Yet, they serve as a critical link as purveyors of mass communication.

The press in its early form was simply the collective effort of individuals, aided by the technology of printing that gave power to multiply and distribute information faster and more effectively than any one individual alone.

Though journalism is the only occupation explicitly protected by the U.S. Constitution, the journalist's freedom to print is there to serve the citizen's right to know and is not meant to take precedence over those citizens' right to speak, have access to and utilize all organs of communication.

Yet, what has been happening is a deviation from this Constitutional right,

through monopolization of the organs of mass media and the professionalization of journalism. This was revealed in the established media's dealings with WikiLeaks.

At the National Conference for Media Reform in Boston, one of the panelists, Greg Mitchell, writer for The Nation magazine described how the establishment media functions as a gatekeeper that decides what to withhold and what to cover. They decide what the public should know according to that media organization's relationship to those in power.

When WikiLeaks first tried to partner up with established media organizations in a gesture of equality, these established media outlets such as the New York Times attempted to take the traditional stance of control and management.

How did the established media come into this role as self proclaimed gatekeeper?

The profession of journalism arms itself with the creed of objectivity to exercise this control. This idea of objectivity can be traced back to the epistemology of physical science, which has been extended into the field of journalism and psychology in the guise of social science.

David Scott and Robin Usher (1996) showed how the foundation of knowledge for this notion of objectivity depends on validation by an outer authority:

One of the most important aspects of these epistemological "good ground" are that the researcher was "objective", i.e. that he or she was unbiased, value neutral and took care to ensure that personal considerations did not intrude into the research process in other words, that the researcher's subjectivity has been eliminated as a factor in the knowledge claim. (p. 12)

Yet, the so-called unbiased reporting is filled with private agendas.

Constitutional scholar and blogger Glenn Greenwald pointed out how American journalism identified themselves as a part of political power.

As an executive editor, Bill Keller went to great lengths to show how he is proud of the fact that he always turns to the Administration for permission for what the Times should or should not publish. For some journalists, what they claim to be a creed of objectivity is actually replaced with or a cover for government authority or corporate interests.

David Allen, associate professor of journalism, describes the consequence of this creation of professional authority:

The importance of professionalism can be seen in the passivity it has created within the body politic. Individuals began to regard professional judgments,

often supported by scientific data, as unquestionable, 'discouraging independent evaluation. [See Allen, D. S. (2005). Democracy, Inc.: The press and law in the corporate rationalization of the public sphere. Chicago: University of Illinois Press. p. 54]

With the rise of the expert class in mass communication, a gap is created between professionals and layman, where people are not encouraged to think for themselves. They start to distrust their own intuitive and experiential ways of knowing.

While science relies on external validation, an epistemology of art would be founded in a more subjective domain. When the scientific approach becomes more dominant, art is often degraded as inferior and considered an illegitimate way to process reality.

Many of the creative avenues of art have been co-opted by commercial interests and are contained within constricted bounds. Music is labeled and controlled by big companies and public art or murals have been replaced by corporate advertisement billboards.

Instead of expanding the First Amendment right for all people, the professionalized media appears to have been doing the opposite.

This censoring of art and particular political points of view is indeed a fundamental assault on free speech and amounts to a colonization of the cultural sphere, where citizens would naturally cultivate connection with their innate creative force through arts and education.

What is happening to WikiLeaks in terms of attempts to discredit them has already been done to ordinary people. Under the umbrella of professionalism, those in power tend to devalue or exclude the voices of citizens from participating in democratic action.

"Freedom of speech is something that represents the very dignity of what a human being is," said Mario Savio, a spokesperson of Free Speech Movement.

What was this freedom of speech that Savio so fiercely defended? The commonly held view is that freedom of speech is simply the right for people to speak without interference.

One underlying principle for this idea is the notion of individuality. Interpreted from the Western framework of the idea of enlightenment, the focus is given to individual expression. Free speech as self-expression is a vital first step of any healthy communication.

Yet, man does not exist in isolation. What is often not looked at is speech from the paradigm of the interdependent self. The meaning of speech is found in the communal ground because humans are inherently social beings and speech is only useful when there is common interest and active listening is involved.

The capacity for dialogue where both parties are given space to freely express themselves with interest in the other is essential. True speech is founded on listening. It requires recognition of the other as an independent being.

When one truly speaks, this act is based on the speaker's listening into where the listener of their speech is coming from.

This vital connection between the act of speaking and listening is not often given its due. In modern days, speaking as an avenue toward one's own personal gain is emphasized. Speech that is not grounded in listening becomes indulging self-talk or animal roaring without higher meaning.

Established media has not been listening to the public. This disrespect for citizens is seen in the act of engaging the public in tabloid drivel, lowering news reporting into trivial gossip.

Citizens voices are not held to be worth listening to. What could be a conversation easily becomes a monologue, with information that is fed from top down.

Language gets abstracted from the common ground. Those who are separated from listening can often speak with complexity and technical jargon. Such speech becomes babbling and tends to obscure or break down communication.

Foremost it uses semantics and euphemisms that distort reality and cut off one's feeling from other human beings. Torture becomes enhanced interrogation. Illegal kidnapping is replaced with extreme rendition and civilians are described as enemy combatants.

This one-sided communication that is often seen in traditional news does not make room for interaction, while increasingly popular online alternative media opens up a space for lively dialogue.

In today's mass media, the spirit of freedom of speech is often lost. By not engaging in active listening and by serving the moneyed elites, many established journalists end up actually working against the true meaning of the First Amendment.

In an interview with Al Jazeera, Assange described how he was surprised by the lack of public response after the release of two war logs.

When journalists act as professionals who have lost community values and become sentinels for the status quo and when art is enslaved to commercial interests, then public space is privatized or left in a vacuum. Citizens who became apathetic and cynical are driven to consume products of a soulless culture to fill that empty space.

In Guernica magazine article on April 29, 2008, Assange posed an urgent question:

What does it mean when only those facts about the world with economic powers behind them can be heard, when the truth lays naked before the world and no one will be the first to speak without payment or subsidy? WikiLeaks' unreported material is only the most visible wave on a black ocean of truth in draws of the fourth estate, waiting for a lobby to subsidize its revelation into a profitable endeavor.

There are a few excellent journalists, yet many who have professional skills become obedient, taking orders from authority. The failure of the Fourth Estate is only the surface of a deeper illness in society.

The deeper issue is the decay of the cultural sphere, and absence of a public who holds policymakers accountable. Fredrick Douglas once said, "Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

Systems will not change from the top, but only when demand for that change comes from the bottom, through the actions of ordinary people.

Before journalists start acting out of morals and speaking truth to power, they must first be reminded of their roots as citizens that share communal values.

What comes first is the enlivening of the cultural sphere, for each person to restore the lost union of speaking and listening. For this, the true impulse of art that had been enslaved by commercial and empirical supremacy must be allowed to freely speak once again.

The authentic hard source material of WikiLeaks made it possible for the organization to meaningfully challenge the authority of establishment and the sophisticated perception management that had been built up over the years.

Their passionate disclosure of classified documents has broken the chains of the creed of objectivity that have kept people down in skepticism and apathy.

WikiLeaks's release of "Collateral Murder" broke through the shield of professions and showed the world what modern war really looks like. Assange described how WikiLeaks wanted "to knock out this 'collateral damage' euphemism,

so when anyone uses it they will think 'collateral murder.'" (as cited in Khatchadourian, 2010).

"Because Assange publishes the full source material, he believes that WikiLeaks is free to offer its analysis, no matter how speculative" (Khatchadourian, 2010). Only when this scientific approach is taken does a space open up for editorial freedom.

WikiLeaks's titling of that video "Collateral Murder" was perceived by some as political slant. Yet, when publishing all source material and disclosing the motives behind it, what is characterized as political slant moves into the realm of artistic license.

WikiLeaks, with its editorial freedom and passionate activism, created a space where uncensored images from a war zone are disseminated freely, encouraging people to step out of a given framework to see things that had been intentionally concealed. Brutal and honest images confront preconceptions and sanitized images that emanate from the halls of power.

"'All' artists who believe in artistic freedom create work that challenge domination." [bell hooks, (1995). *Art on my mind: Visual politics*. New York: New Press, p. 42, 1995]

The role of art lies in bringing constructive critique to a dominantly held view. WikiLeaks's presentation of "Collateral Murder" was an artistic act. It invited the world to examine what is portrayed through the euphemism, "collateral damage," and to feel the misery of innocent people subjected to the barbarism of war collateral murder.

Images of the Apache helicopter, gunmen shooting at a crawling wounded man emerged before the public eye and could speak for themselves. They call for emotional engagement and for a compassionate shift in perspective.

The use of Native American nomenclature in the U.S. military such as Apache and Black Hawk helicopters had for a moment been lifted and revealed for what it is – the continuation of oppression of indigenous people and of genocide.

WikiLeaks instigated the freeing innate power of art. This is only just a beginning. Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire spoke of how once art's inherent creative power is released, it spreads and transforms the work of artists:

The arts gradually cease to be the mere expression of the easy life of the affluent bourgeoisie, and begin to find their inspiration in the hard life of the people. Poets begin to write about more than their lost loves, and even the theme of lost love becomes less maudlin, more objective and lyrical. They speak

now of the field hand and laborer not as abstract and metaphysical concepts, but as concrete men with concrete lives. [Freire, P. (2000). *Cultural action for freedom*. MA: Harvard Educational Review. p. 51]

Many around the globe are following WikiLeaks' lead to revitalize the cultural sphere and reclaim citizenry power.

"I feel that is the job of any good writer or filmmaker or artist of any sort to look at the thing that no one else wants to look at, to hold up the truths that most of society would rather deny, and to say, 'This is who we are.'" said filmmaker James Spione (as cited in Andrews, 2011).

He lent his talent to bring life to the scene captured in WikiLeaks Collateral Murder video in a documentary, *Incident in New Baghdad*.

"Art becomes a political act, a conscious effort to facilitate and participate in social change," said artist Dekade-Z (as cited in Andrews, 2011) who assisted with the birth of TheJuiceMedia Rap News. With its combination of rap and moving imagery this new news frequency stepped forward to deepen the Fourth Estate.

"We lost TV to Murdoch, the press to the sharks; This internet our last channel to connect to the mark. No rhetorical questions at last: If we lose this frequency we will be left in the dark" (RapNews 4: WikiLeaks v The Pentagon).

The creative duo of Hugo Farrant and Giordano Nanni calls for audience participation in history as it is happening.

When the true force of art is freed, it works to facilitate and engage a rapture of perception. Art communicates through listening. A conversation through images and feelings is the act of going where the audience is and presenting something that is open to the context of each individual's own life.

It is the act of speaking and listening at the same time. For example, spoken word poet Taalām Acey speaks in a manner where those who hear him can feel they are being listened to through his words.

Speaking based on listening invites others into dialogue. For too long, establishment media has treated people as ignorant masses who passively receive information and become deaf to their community. Assange repeatedly spoke of how WikiLeaks is taking the First Amendment and giving it to the world.

The First Amendment was founded on the spirit of the Declaration of Independence. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, "

Who are the people that were meant to be equal in this historical document? Is

it to apply only to U.S. citizens?

For WikiLeaks, it means everyone in the world. WikiLeaks is a transnational organization. They listen to anonymous whistle-blowers, whose voices up to then have been increasingly denied. It is the publisher of last resort, carrying voices that yearn to be free regardless of race and nationality.

Since its creation, the Declaration of Independence has been regarded by many as a universal, even divine document that has inspired millions.

If the ideals in the Declaration are truly universal, it would be extended to everyone. WikiLeaks appears to be working to fill the gap between ideals and reality. They are showing through their actions how freedom of speech is everyone's inherent right and not simply empty rhetoric.

How are they doing it? When people are so long excluded from any true democratic process, made to feel powerless, they eventually forget how to think and speak for themselves.

While the State smothers speech, WikiLeaks listens. It is their genuine listening that frees the speech, making ordinary citizens feel that they themselves matter. Those who feel listened to start to trust their own thoughts and find words that organically emerge from their own experience.

We saw this in the uprising of the Middle East. People began trusting their ways of knowing, their own experiences and intuitions that had been denied by authority. Assange spoke how Young people around the world, after feeling excluded from politics now begin to actively participate in taking hold of their own future.

Their action is revitalizing the First Amendment around the world. The new technology of the Internet and its decentralized open-source nature tends to neutralize power relationships. It allows power to flow back to ordinary people.

The individual now can access and distribute information more efficiently. The Internet is the modern equivalent of the first printing press, this time making publishing accessible to all.

Social media such as Twitter connects people around the world. It has transformed mass communication from one-sided, top-down filters to two-way and peer conversations. As was seen in the recent AskObama Twitter Town Hall event, people around the world twittered and voiced opinions that till then had no forum.

Like an avalanche, courage is contagious. WL Central with its telos of

"WikiLeaks news, analysis and action" responded to the call to fill in the vacuum in journalism.

Sites such as these along with transnational social networking counter the propaganda of corporate media that relies on public ignorance and apathy.

Asher Wolf and like individuals who seem to work with little sleep are crowd-sourcing, working for free to circulate the latest news and tweets to inform people what is happening around the world.

The loosely tied online collective Anonymous has also emerged around the globe to demand the voices of citizens to be heard and illegitimate power challenged. WikiLeaks Forum and bloggers engage people with their articles to engage in comments and discussion.

WikiLeaks sparked interaction among these clustering grassroots that have bubbled up across borders. Billboards sprang up that seems to symbolize a transformation of the corporate landscape.

"You can speak freely It is really the thing that marks us as just below the angels" Mario Savio

We are approaching the threshold of a great turning and are faced with a choice of the evolution or devolution of global society. A just and humane world depends on mankind's ability to communicate in support of one another. It is speech in service to relationship and to listening that Savio saw as giving man meaning.

"WikiLeaks is the intelligence agency of the people." They show how each can live up to the responsibility of the First Amendment.

Exercising freedom of speech is taking responsibility for speaking as an act of listening. In the age of WikiLeaks, freedom of speech is not a professional privilege nor should it apply only to a particular nation or group of people. It is everyone's right and responsibility.

Each person's act of free speech becomes a torch for a new civilization to come.

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