

THE WIKILEAKS LOGIC

JEAN-GABRIEL GANASCIA

LIP6 – University Pierre et Marie Curie

4, place Jussieu, 75005, Paris, France, Jean-Gabriel.Ganascia@lip6.fr

Abstract. WikiLeaks has focused the attention of the media during a few weeks by the end of 2010. The diplomacy of the United-State of America has been called into question. Modern democracies are hampered; as sovereign states, they are now facing a novel dilemma. This paper constitutes an attempt to understand this evolution by seriously considering the WikiLeaks project not as a simple media strategy, but as the possible kickoff of a totally new way doing politics, in a perfect transparency, without secrecy nor hidden issues. Our purpose here is both to show how information technologies, of which WikiLeaks is a sub-product, contribute to transform the traditional political forms and how the notion of “sousveillance” helps us to apprehend these evolutions.

1. A Few Recent Facts

WikiLeaks has focused the attention of the media during a few weeks by the end of 2010 and, previously, during the summer and the autumn. The diplomacy of the United-State of America and of some other countries has been called into question by what people called the *Cablegate*, by analogy to the *Watergate*. Let us remember that 250,000 of secret telegrams containing embarrassing information about American, European and Middle-East foreign policies were divulged to newspapers by the WikiLeaks organization. Modern democracies, and especially the United-States of America, were hampered. The main argument they developed against WikiLeaks was formal: it concerned the danger that was posed to those whose name had been explicitly mentioned in the cables. However, it clearly appeared that, for those sovereign states, the question is not only just saving life of a few people: they are now facing a novel dilemma. On the one hand, last few years many democracies opened public data to all citizens (Obama 2009). On the other hand, states are always used to deal with many matters, especially in the diplomatic area, either in secrecy, or, at least, in a discrete way. As a consequence, they can't easily accept the divulgation of top secret informations. In brief, the aspiration to a total transparency, that many of our contemporaries share, modifies the rules of government, while WikiLeaks shows the limits of officially proclaimed public transparency.

2. A New Ideal of Transparency

With the recent developments of information technologies a new ideal of total transparency seems to be born. Note that, by itself, the ideal of total transparency is not new. It already existed in the 19th century (Benjamin 1934). The use of glasses in the architecture, for instance the “Chrystal Palace” that was built for the London Universal Exhibition in 1851, reflected this ideal.

A few years before, in the end of the 18th century, Jeremy Bentham had described an architecture for surveillance designed to ensure a total transparency (Bentham 1838). Called the Panopticon, it was a model for prisons, factories, hospitals, etc., that have been conceived to make individuals totally visible to their guards, while these ones were invisible to them. The goal of transparency was again to facilitate education, surveillance, care, etc., which enhanced the role and the situation of authority holders.

By contrast, the new transparency that is encouraged today is individual and not institutional. It is directed towards and against the authority holders, which are permanently under the cameras. For instance, the policemen are continuously filmed. The professors, physicians, lawyers, politicians etc. are permanently evaluated, etc.

The concept of “sousveillance” that was introduced by Steve Mann well characterizes this new form of transparency (Mann 2003). This neologism forged by analogy and opposition to the word surveillance, means that the watcher is situated below (“sous” in French) the authority, while in case of surveillance he is situated above.

3. The Horizon of WikiLeaks

To understand the horizon of WikiLeaks, let us first note that Julian Assange, the promoter and editor in chief of WikiLeaks, was initially a computer scientist who first worked on cryptography. So doing, he adopted an atypical posture. While almost all the cryptographers work for armies, secret services or banks, he developed cryptographic tools for people. His idea was to make everybody able to hide information to the authorities (state, company, etc.).

Now, with WikiLeaks, Julian Assange proposes to render publicly available all information about authorities. He proposes creating “open governments” where all data about the government and the public decisions would be worldwide accessible to everybody. The underlying idea of a perfect collective transparency seems to justify his action, which somehow refutes his first attitude of privacy protection.

4. Limits of the Generalized Sousveillance

The utopia of a generalized sousveillance, i.e. of a sousveillance extended to the overall society, that excludes surveillance, faces an inherent contradiction: the authorities are made of individuals, who, as such, need to be protected, which becomes impossible because of the exclusion of surveillance.

Without going deeply in the exploration of this first contradiction, consider now the extension of the sousveillance regime to the overall worldwide society. It faces at least two types of limitations, some being intrinsic, others extrinsic.

The main intrinsic limitation is due to our cognitive abilities that are too limited to permit to observe and to assimilate all the information we have at our disposal. As a consequence, we spontaneously filter the information flows and we focus our attention on the most prominent facts. But, we do not decide by ourselves what criteria are adopted to qualify the prominence. Most of the time, this is decided by people who manipulate us by distracting our attention.

The second type of limitation is extrinsic in the sense that it is not an own limit of the regime of sousveillance itself, but it is due to foreign factors. Specifically, nothing prohibits the coexistence of a generalized regime of sousveillance with multiple regimes of surveillance. For instance, NGOs or big multinational companies may continue to gather and exploit data; they even can take advantage of free public data to extract useful knowledge for the sake of their own interest, without any respect of privacy.

5. The Failure of the Wikileaks Ideal

Despite the attacks to which it was submitted and the fact the Julian Assange has been jailed, WikiLeaks is undoubtedly very popular nowadays. There even exist attempts to build more or less specialized clones of WikiLeaks in many places all over the world. However, the original Assange project seems to have failed. The causes of this failure are directly related to the limitations of the generalized sousveillance regime that were expressed in the previous paragraph.

First of all, Julian Assange wanted to freely disseminate data allowing every citizen to get any information he wanted, when he wanted. However, during the Cablegate, WikiLeaks didn't freely divulge the 250,000 diplomatic telegrams he had; he sent them to well established newspapers that had to filter, anonymize the messages and dramatize their publication, with appropriate comments and advertisements.

Another failure of the WikiLeaks project is due to the project itself, which was supposed to free people from any kind of authorities. However, it clearly appears that WikiLeaks has now become a new authority, which plays a role symmetrical to other more traditional authorities, as states or NGOs and companies. Julian Assange himself acts in his own organization without any real transparency, which shows the limitation of the generalized sousveillance principle as it was promoted by WikiLeaks.

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