Responsibility and Organizing in Watching the Watchers

In the last week of October 2013, it was revealed that political and personal communications of the German Chancellor were spied upon by US secret services. Puzzlement rose as no one seemed to know who to hold responsible. US National Security Agency (NSA), which operated it? US Congress, that voted the Patriot Act, which allows those activities? President Obama, who did not stop spying on allies? Al Qaeda, whose actions sparked global outrage and so created the conditions to allow a skyrocketing, globally spread intelligence activity? Initial Internet protocol designers, who came from the open culture of the 60s and 70s and did not bother to implement identification technologies, so facilitating large scale anonymous online activities decades later? Or the German counter espionage and the company that implemented the security system of Merkel’s phone? Or even the global community of mathematicians, who claimed the infallibility of their prime numbers theorems, so making everyone else overlooking the dangers of translations of theorems into security algorithms and software?

Which organizations should perform a reaction? Merkel herself, with her memories of Stasi, confronting her ally face to face? The national diplomacies? Engineers, who should not have assumed the scientific primacy of beautiful simplicity of math over the messy world of technology in practice?

1 http://www.bartleby.com/73/1531.html
Open networks have been changing the attribution of responsibility not only by speeding up existing processes but also – more poignantly here – by challenging the role of organizational and technological intermediaries. This is quite evident in recent cases of whistle-blowers who quickly and effectively reached the global public opinion trailblazing unanticipated paths. Nonetheless, institutions seem to maintain an influential role in performativity. Inadequate conceptualizations may show their limits starkly when empirical occurrences like these shed light on their blind spots. Although it is needless to say that the views on recent leaks are diverse, it stands clear that focusing on individual organizations, who are assumed to have boundaries and to perform according to their functions, is empirically of little help, theoretically questionable (Czarniawska: 2008 and 2013) and ethically inadequate (Floridi: 2012). Following Czarniawska’s (2011) advice that “organization scholars should be studying construction and maintenance of connections among collective actions”, I compare two cases, usually referred to as Wikileaks and Snowden (it will be made clear that the most visible actors are not necessarily the key ones).

In the age of dispersed organizing processes and huge unstructured data ‘oceans’, these two cases from recent news help illustrate a wide and powerful call to responsibility far beyond what a narrow focus on bounded organizations could explain. The contrastive analysis of these cases shows first how organizing exceeds organizations, and then the role of framing and sense-making that established institutions (not organizations\(^2\)) like press and free speech continue to play, although in novel ways.

Even though they tend to be studied by diverse disciplines, it is commonly accepted that writing technologies, organizational forms and public opinion have being interwoven since at least the invention and massive deployment of the printing press (Goody: 1986, McLuhan: 1962, Ong: 1982). The fourth estate, not least celebrated by Welles in “Citizen Kane”, has always relied on non-journalist informants. So called whistle-blowers have often found support and resonance in the press, even more than in other media. Still, through the last decades, all mass media have been heavily criticized for becoming complacent to the powers they were supposed to watchdog. Benkler (2011) advocates for a “networked” return of the fourth estate by detailing - and defending - Wikileaks’ operations. Earlier, Button (2009) claims that internet-based communication allows the emergence of a ‘fifth estate’ distinct from the fourth.

Initial enthusiasm for the so called blogosphere found ground in the resentment against established media organizations. We were a few years before the turn of the millennium when the internet seemed to promise openness and democratization to every niche of societies (for instance Kerckhove: 1997).\(^3\) Following such enthusiasm, open participation rather than professional journalism would have counterbalanced dominant interests by watchdogging the powerful, showing their responsibilities and exacting accountability. Since then, ‘citizen journalism’ – and lay people’s data production in general – has certainly been challenging journalism (Bruns: 2012, Lewis: 2012, Newman et al.: 2012, Ostertag and Tuchman: 2012). Nowadays indeed, many journalists tend to moderate and edit content produced online by ‘crowds’ in their acting as opinion leaders; by the time photoreporters have flown to war or disaster sites, plenty of pictures are already made publicly available by locals; the mode of

\(^2\) Here I simply rely on the Neoinstitutional difference between institutions intended as social models, and organizations as actors (North: 1990, Powell and DiMaggio: 1991).

\(^3\) Beside widely used blog platforms, Indymedia may be seen as an early attempt in this sense (Anderson: 2010, Hintz: 2013).
communication is becoming more personalized also because of comments on online news and journalists eliciting materials from readers/eyewitnesses (Landert: 2014); readers do not seem willing to pay for information that can be found elsewhere for free, and so on and so forth. However, the current breakthrough in transparency is being led by motivated, highly technically skilled players. “Close to the machine” whistleblowers are the empirical focus of the present work.

Surveillance has two equally relevant sides: large organizations, governments in particular, always pushed to watch ‘their’ people. Citizens periodically manifest intentions to exact accountability by watching the watchers. Respectively, the effect of open networks on this situation is twofold: government agencies like the NSA say that surveillance is the price of keeping the internet open, so privacy is the price for people to pay. Citizens and multinationals whose business depends on cloud computing do not seem to agree on this. On the other side, it should not be overlooked that states have never had so many troubles in keeping their secrets. So, asymmetry of information is being eroded on both sides.

Navigating Data
Knorr-Cetina et al. (2000) and Czarniawska (2008) among others have departed from reified views on organizations and focus on the way organizing processes unfold. Considering organizations as an outcome of organizing processes rather than a pre-requisite provides the best position to capture and explain the information infrastructure-related cases addressed here. As it is hard to find any online data that is not part of a database in a way or another, “it is vital to dissolve the current disjunct [sic] between database (as technical storage medium) and policy (as way of acting in the world). The production of the database is productive of the new world we are creating” (Bowker: 2000, p. 676). Manovich (1999) spotted that databases, compared to other types of information goods like novels or movies, are not dramatized. I interpret his position in the sense that databases have a structure but do not have a default order that leads towards a message. Databases have no plot, intended as a single meaningful (not necessarily causal) way of connecting their parts. If information in databases trades plot for open-endedness, online data goes further by giving up consistent structure as well, so limiting the domain of relevance of classification systems a la’ Bowker and Star (1999).

Opening the dams of data structure and access has flooded most of us with information overload for quite some time now. Still, sense-making did not collapse completely as in Weick’s (1993) disaster analysis. Possibly, an escape fire (or a raft to stay with the water metaphor) are narratives. Indeed, information keeps making sense to people to the extent it resonates with recognizable narratives. To explain this digression in media studies, I anticipate the message of my story: the effects of Snowden’s leaks have been more clearcut because they aligned with the Western established narrative of free speech and investigative journalism. Instead, Wikileaks originated more contradictory reactions when it published a huge dataset of

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4 Verplanke et al. (2010), Miscione G. (2011) and Miscione et al. (2013) can be read in this light.
5 If emplotted information goods are like walkpaths, databases are more like buildings: no pre-defined use, but inscription and affordances. This position is also freely inspired by Eco’s (1991) essay on “The Open Work”, according to which interpretation oscillates between intentio operis and intentio lectoris, whereas intentio auctoris pertains to psychology.
hundreds of thousands of unedited diplomatic cables leaving it to anyone to make sense of it in their own way. And we all did it, very diversely.

Playing the Flute rather than just blowing the Whistle
Both cases sketched here are from highly networked social environments, relatively micro in size (no more than dozens of actors) and globally distributed at the same time. This is typical of contemporary organizational forms exploiting information infrastructures.

The alleged departure of mainstream media from investigative journalism has created a void that contemporary discontent public opinion is eager to see filled. Recognizing that power is also based on visibility and invisibility, Wikileaks aimed beyond the curtains that separate stage and backstage to reverse visibility of the surveilled and invisibility of the powerful. Wikileaks provides access to anonymous contributions of raw, unprocessed and unedited data as opposed to filtered, accredited and standardized information provided by established media (as for example by news agencies, Boczkowski: 2009 and Czarniawska: 2012). It does so by deploying available cryptographic technology to ensure the anonymity of whistleblowers and the operational reliability of its infrastructure (also mirroring its data on servers under diverse jurisdictions, and adopting diverse money transfer tools including Bitcoin, a hardly traceable e-currency). This is part of a tacit deal, because Wikileaks relies on mutuality: its contributors provide information while relying upon the veil of anonymity provided to them. In fact, Bradley Edward Manning, the US soldier who collected the diplomatic cables and blew the whistle via Wikileaks in 2010, was identified and arrested after a person he chatted with about his leaks reported him.

It is worth stressing how this radically open approach to information management and distrust for formal organizations is very typical of hackers’ culture, which also manifests in the principles and practices of free and open source software (Coleman: 2004, Coleman and Golub: 2008, Miscione: 2000). Actually Julian Assange, founder of Wikileaks and a long time hacker himself, simply did what any open source software developer does continuously: making unrefined data publicly available to allow “the wisdom of the crowds” (Surowiecki: 2005) to help out. Besides not having the property rights to publish the information, the difference is that, contrary to software code, the general public could read and understand what was publicly released. And it was not indifferent.

In recent years the USA was repeatedly accusing other countries, China in particular, to spy and hack its computer systems. Being the center of the internet infrastructure was said to expose the USA more than less connected countries. The Snowden case suddenly showed how this

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6 Wikileaks states to have released 251,287 cables (http://wikileaks.org/cablegate.html, last accessed December 6th, 2013). Use instructions exemplify quite clearly Wikileaks opened stance “Search for events that you remember that happened for example in your country. You can browse by date or search for an origin near you. Pick out interesting events and tell others about them.”

7 Someone may object that Wikileaks and Snowden’s cases are one the evolution of the other. This is plausible, and to me it suggests that organizational learning might have taken place across these globally dispersed actors. Actually, Benkler (2011), which was written before Snowden’s case, shows how there was a progressive increase of involvement of the established press.

8 He started sex reassignment to become Chelsea Elizabeth Manning.

9 It is worth noting that a private soldier could access data from all US embassies also because those information systems had been mindlessly integrated in the first place, overlooking the risks this trendy choice would entail.

10 “Given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow” as Raymond (1999) put it about open source organizational form.
architectural centrality was turned inside-out to US advantage into a sort of global panopticon. Snowden was a contractor working as network administrator for the National Security Agency. In this story, his role corresponds to Manning’s but the process he started was quite different. Snowden chose a very different way of playing the cat-and-mouse game with authorities. In a move that reminds of the Cold War spy stories, he flew from Hawaii to Hong Kong (China, but tied to the West and its values of freedom) where he met Glenn Greenwald, a US journalist of the UK newspaper The Guardian and a few trusted colleagues. At that point he seems to have negotiated face to face what to do. I stress that in terms of organizational functions, Greenwald (not Snowden) corresponds to Assange and The Guardian and other registered newspapers like The Washington Post, which played a major role in the Water Gate, correspond to the platform Wikileaks to voice the whistle-blowers.

So, the two actor-networks (whistleblower-mediator-platform) are: Manning-Assange-Wikileaks (MAW) and Snowden-Greenwald-Guardian (SGG). Both have been revitalizing the fourth state, but in different ways and with different outcomes. MAW opted for pure transparency the hacker way, therefore no curation of content, which was left to anyone to “datamine” and make sense of\(^\text{11}\). In spite of immediate outrage, it took months to journalists to distil gossips about leaders’ questionable behaviors from relevant geopolitical insights. SGG accorded upfront a more prominent role to traditional investigative journalism to focus, select and publish: so far, of the 50 to 200 thousands documents that Snowden has allegedly acquired, only about 250 have been made public.

**Media Framing and Political Overflow**

Greenwald said the former NSA contractor took extreme precautions to make sure many different people around the world have these archives to ensure the stories will be published. MAW pursued the same goal by publishing most of what they had\(^\text{12}\). By playing it more traditionally, SGG could leverage a level of legitimation that MAW never gained. Indeed, in public opinion ears, freedom of speech sounds far more appropriate when it is about clear and well-timed stories like those published by newspapers rather than an unstructured dataset full of gossips of dubious public interest. So, Assange (the public face of MAW) had little more than his own persecution to dramatize on the media stage, therefore to offer for global public opinion sense-making. On the other hand, SGG could claim they had an order to restore as their goal: having watchdogs addressing responsibilities of the powerful. From SGG position, it is more convincing to appeal to the First Amendment and whatever guaranties free speech. So that SGG gets legitimation by the strong plot of Western democracies being based on freedom from governments. Free speech can counter-balance governments’ argument of need of secrecy to protect security after Sep 11 more than hackers’ sub-cultural claims of “information wants to be free”. So, MAW and SGG’s informational points are pretty similar, but they tie into narratives of quite different resonance, therefore performativity.

\(^{11}\) Computational linguistics methodologies may help this research.

\(^{12}\) In terms of computer security, which affects hacking culture, publicity is possibly one of the best strategies to maintain it at the highest standard because it avoids anyone to monopolize and exploit vulnerabilities (Miscione: 2000).
For these reasons, the recognition of role of media and free speech as institutions made SGG more legitimized, thus more effective in changing world leaders’ agendas. However, MAW’s openness should not be dismissed as confusing, minoritarian, therefore less relevant. Its lack of a straightforward plot of general appeal, thus of focus, made it more unpredictable (some of MAW cables seem to have sparked the completely unexpected Tunisian revolt and the Arab Spring) but datamining can produce effects on the longer term. No unique narrative may mean many narratives yet to be found.

### Data Realism vs. Communication Realism

Circularity of news production is central in Czarniawska’s (2012) study of news agencies. The news that Bloomberg reporters could have extra access to Bloomberg terminal users’ information adds a cyberspace ‘flavor’ to such circularity. Indeed, for Bloomberg, providing information management tools proved to be a way to enhance the outreach of its own sight in news production. Not differently, the centrality of the USA in internet architecture provided it with unparalleled access to worldwide data flows.

The cases presented above show how, once established, communication circuits can be hard to question. In this sense, the organizations that rely upon those circuits (media companies and governments among many others) are obstacles to organizing information flow differently. This is confirmed by how MAW, which operated in a more unconventional manner than SGG, found it more difficult to get acceptance and legitimation. This difference is worth more discussion. Both MAW and SGG aim at showing the “reality out there” that people are not aware of. In this sense, they are both “realist”, but in remarkably different ways. MAW manifests realism by minimizing its story-teller/curator role (as it would inevitably mean “sanitizing” data) and expecting that data would speak by themselves. SGG is realist by implicitly acknowledging the rules of the communication game. But there is probably more to it.

Claiming truth vs. falsehood seems simplistic to frame the two cases. All protagonists justify their actions as motivated by unveiling the truth. However, there is a difference about how they portray their antagonists: SGG reveals the secret that US government holds and claims to be patriotic by appealing to a foundational freedom principle of America. MAW maintains that all governments lie. This opposition recalls Greimas’s semiotic square.

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13 Although things are far from stabilized, comparing the consequences on the corresponding constituencies of the two actor-networks can be relevant: Manning underwent trial and received a sentence of 30 years in prison, Snowden is on temporary asylum in Russia and Germany and other countries are considering protecting him. Assange is practically under house arrest in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London whereas Greenwald has been offered 250 million USD to create a watchdog organization the way he dreams it. Wikileaks is under continuous pressure while The Guardian increased its global audience substantially and The Washington Post has been bought by Jeff Bezos, amazon.com’s founder.  


15 This claim may mark a change of internet-related imaginary. There was a climax in sci-fi and common sense about illusions that electronic communication create in societies vs. hard facts. This probably culminated in the popular narrative of the trilogy Matrix. Those terms are swopped by the cases presented. ‘Real’, well-established organizations like governments created apparent transparency (for example [http://www.openthegovernment.org/](http://www.openthegovernment.org/)) also defring public attention from other sensitive operations. On the other hand, information networks showed what was happening behind closed doors.
SGG framing of its antagonists as holding a secret allows the latter to maintain a level of legitimacy (states have always been allowed to have secrets) that is denied by MAW’s stance (clearly expressed in recent Assange’s book\(^\text{16}\) along the lines of crypto-anarchism), summarized by the maxim “privacy for the weak and transparency for the powerful”. So, Greimas’s square can help explaining how two dramatization strategies are pursued differently in identifying with and differentiating from established institutions.

On the basis of the above, it is possible to suggest that the traditional hierarchy of concepts of information studies (data - information - knowledge – wisdom) can be developed into the following: data - information - plots – influence. In fact, following the comparison of MAW and SGG, one can see that the framing and enplotting operated by media facilitated the overflow of the whistleblowers’ message into the political arena. Therefore media as institutions enhanced the performativity of whistle-blowers.

As a final remark, I would like to suggest that, after having followed the action (as Czarniawska emending Latour recommends) for quite some time, we should become more knowledgeable about the new context of action that information infrastructures contribute to generating. In fact, as the NSA has grown into a datamining bureaucracy, Kafka rather than Orwell may provide more poignant analogies. And now that all that information is dangerously stored in one single place in Maryland, and while public opinion waits for Hollywood to dramatize this story on silver screens, I look forward to seeing what happens with the people who are certainly trying to gain access to NSA humongous dataset with any possible means. With

literally global interests represented there, I have no doubt that right now the most skilful hackers on Earth are picking up the challenge of priding their egos by getting their hands dirty in such unprecedented honeypot of data that not the NSA, but our fears ultimately created.
REFERENCES


Eco U. (1991), L’opera aperta, Bompiani, Milano


