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Democratic affordances: Politics, media, and digital technology after WikiLeaks

This paper considers the role of digital technologies and cultures in re-envisioning democratic media and ethics. Much hope is being invested in the potential of digital technologies to provide the way forward to addressing the impasse in democratic communication, especially through innovative online news and journalism tools and projects. In the context of such discourses and initiatives, this paper argues that we need to develop a serviceable notion of 'democratic affordances', the qualities of digital technologies, and the media ecologies in which they take shape, that allow individuals and collectivities to pursue democracy, ethics, and justice. I explore this idea via an analysis of the celebrated case of Julian Assange's WikiLeaks, perhaps the most singular and spectacular example of innovation in democratic affordances. For its instigators, the potential of WikiLeaks at its birth appeared revolutionary and straightforward. As it has turned out, however, the interactions between journalism, news, and the digital in this novel platform have not been straightforward at all. The case of WikiLeaks thus reveals the need to take a much broader view of the pluralistic system in which such digital technologies now unfold. In particular, the paper argues for a comprehensive, pluralistic approach to designing the communicative architecture for ethical and truth-telling practices that go hand-in-hand with the struggle for democracy, justice and the good life.

Keywords: democracy, digital technology, democratic communication, affordances, WikiLeaks

The power of people speaking up and resisting together terrifies corrupt and undemocratic power. So much so that ordinary people here in the West are now the enemy of governments, an enemy to be watched, an enemy to be controlled and to be impoverished. True democracy is not the White House. True democracy is not Canberra. True democracy is the resistance of people, armed with the truth, against lies, from Tahrir to right here in London. Every day, ordinary people teach us that democracy is free speech and dissent.

Julian Assange (2012a)

The whole trend [of the 'truth paradox'] is fed by a growing abundance of platforms where power is interrogated and chastened, so that monitory democracies tend to nurture uncertainty, doubt, scepticism, modesty, irony, the conviction that truth has many faces, the recognition that the meaning of the world and its dynamics are so complicated that, ultimately, its true meaning and significance cannot be fully grasped.

John Keane (2013a)

Introduction: Digital hopes for democracies
Around the world in the 2010s, discourses, plans, and experiments for re-imagining democratic media and ethics centre on the prospects of digital technologies and digital cultures. In recent uprisings and social upheavals, new kinds of media devices and practices have being hailed as the signature of a new form of social action and political mode.

When Philippines President Joseph Estrada was forced from office by a popular uprising in 2001, he felt it was due to protests organised by text messaging which he dubbed a *coup d'texte* (Goggin 2006). Mobile phones and the internet were widely used in the 2007 Burmese 'Saffron revolution'. Iran's 2009 'Green revolution' was nicknamed the 'Twitter revolution' (Ash 2009, Sreberny and Khiabany 2010). Egypt's 'Arab spring' of 2011 was styled the 'Facebook revolution' (Beaumont and Sherwood 2011, Shenker 2011, Ghonim 2012). A central theme in how such movements for democracy are understood revolves around a novel digital technology as incubator in revolutions and societal uprisings (Castells 2012).

More broadly, the subject of digital technology's use for democracy is the subject of a large and still inconclusive body of experimental practice and research across many countries, political systems and cultures, and social settings. It

is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an adequate assessment of these adventures in democracy via digital technology and their associated research and debates (Chadwick and Howard 2008, Kies 2010, Dahlberg and Siapera 2007). Instead, the focus is on the increasing effort being invested in the prospects of digital technologies for a more democratic media. As Robert Hackett and collaborator Yuezhi Zhao point out, there exists a complex set of intersections between global media and processes of democratisation. This involves both 'democratisation through the media – the use of communications by civil society or states to promote democratic processes elsewhere in society' and 'democratisation of the media themselves' (Zhao and Hackett 2005: 2). Clearly digital technology is the media of our time most widely credited with enabling great strides in democratisation.

We can say with conviction and evidence that digital technology is a key factor in the transformation of contemporary media – with far from obvious implications. Contemporary media are in extraordinary flux in many societies, especially in the West. Traditional roles in journalism and media, and their assumed entailments for ethics, are being fundamentally reworked. As the business models for journalism and news dramatically shift in the face of internet-based search, with many traditional journalism positions lost, all media organisations, but especially newspapers, are grappling with the rise of online, mobile, and social media devices, applications, forms, and platforms.

Increasingly, professional journalists and media workers, existing and new media organisations, citizens, activists, politicians, leaders, civil society, government, business, and others interested in democracy wish to take the opportunity of the 'creative destruction', as economist Joseph Schumpeter (1975) termed it, of existing media, to find better ways to remodel these institutions in the service of existing or imagined democracies. There are diverse positions on these new nexus of democracy and media – from the fit between digital platforms and John Keane's notion of 'monitory democracy' (Keane 2009) to projects of 'open democracy', 'open government' (using computer culture notions of open source) or 'gov 2.0'. Much attention has concentrated on the potential of the widely available digital network technologies to support democratic communication – starting with the early internet, moving through the web, and blogging, and then focusing on mobile media and social media such as Twitter and Facebook.

If we examine digital platforms for journalism in particular, a project with a long genealogy is the use of websites and blogs, suitably modified, to publish quality journalism. Forerunners of such sites, which have enjoyed financial viability and longevity, include the Huffington Post and Slate.com. There are now many such blogs around the world that have taken over from independent newspapers, small magazines, and journals in providing journalism and news, commentary, reviews, essays and critique. Sometimes these seek to run on a subscription basis, as the Australian website Crikey.com sought to do. Others start as free blogs, underpinned by funds from foundations and universities (such as another Australian title *Inside Story*) and then solicit donations, or even provide printed copies and compendium via newsagents and bookshops. A new initiative is the Dutch digital news site called De Correspondent (https://decorrespondent.nl/). It attracted a great deal of attention in March 2013 for its mission to value quality over quantity, and publish long-form journalism on a bespoke digital platform – but also for raising a substantial amount of capital via crowdsourcing.

A new kind of project that uses digital technology to rethink one particularly salient mission of democratic media and ethics is PolitiFact.com, a project of the *Tampa Bay Times*. PolitiFact.com aims to 'to help you find the truth in American politics' (Politifact 2013). To do so, *Times* reporters and editors 'fact-check statements by members of Congress, the White House, lobbyists and interest groups and rate them on our Truth-O-Meter' (ibid). The Truth-O-Meter is central to Politifact, and involves analysing statements in their context, dividing them into individual claims, which are independently verified. Then the statement is given one of six ratings: true; mostly true; half true; mostly false; false; pants on fire (ibid). With PolitiFact Mobile the Truth-O-Meter comes as an app to provide fact-checking on a smartphone or table device. PolitiFact is a North American incarnation, but former *Sydney Morning Herald* publisher and editor-in-chief Peter Fray has the rights to introduce it into Australia in mid-2013.

These are but two tendencies among a raft of digital experiments. The general problem besetting most of these, as I have already suggested, is that it is typically unclear whether digital technology is bringing about improvements in democracy, let alone playing a much more creative, transformative role in constituting new modes of democracy (Sykes 2012, Curran 2011, Fenton 2010, Hindman 2009,

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Papacharissi 2010). Despite the many reasons for scepticism, digital technology is still widely believed to be critical in achieving a breakthrough in the impasse of democratic communication. And experiments in digital technology and democracy are imbued with much hope and excitement.

In the context of such discourses and initiatives, this paper argues that we urgently need to develop a serviceable notion of 'democratic affordances'. The concept of affordance was developed by psychologist James J. Gibson (1977) and is widely used in design and analysis of digital technology to indicate the elusive zone of the quality of an object, environment, technological system, application, or artefact that allows an individual to perform a particular action. An affordance, in effect, is what kind of use is suggested by a technology. By democratic affordance, I wish to raise the question of how we identify, evaluate, debate, select, and modify the qualities of digital technologies, and the media ecologies in which they take shape, that allow individuals and collectivities to pursue democracy, ethics, and justice.

My framework for understanding and proposing democratic affordance as a useful concept in this project of re-envisioning democratic media and ethics draws on media and cultural studies research on digital technology and cultures, but also from the extensive science and technology studies (STS) literature on the shaping and politics of technology. In particular, there was a famous debate kicked off by US scholar Langdon Winner, in his article 'Do artifacts have politics?' (Winner 1980). This paper received at least two dedicated rebuttals (Woolgar and Cooper 1999, Joerges 1999), and his argument has now receded in the face of a wide range of approaches that emphasised the open-ended nature of technology, the deeply enmeshed mutual constitution of society and technology, and the complex, recursive non-linear politics that is conducted through the design, implementation, and appropriation of technology (Latour and Weibel 2005, Latour 2005). Despite the emerging consensus in these research fields that it is rarely possible to read the politics of technology, there is also a strong view that such a project is important. These ideas are behind my proposal of the concept of democratic affordance as something that would bring a much-needed focus on how we can evaluate, critique, abandon or adapt, modify, and refine the many digital platforms now being born under the sign of democracy.

In what follows, I explore the idea of democratic affordances via an analysis of the celebrated case of Julian Assange's WikiLeaks, perhaps the most singular and spectacular example of innovation in democratic affordances. For its instigators, the potential capacities of WikiLeaks at its birth appeared revolutionary and straightforward. As it has turned out, however, the interactions among journalism, news, and the digital in this novel platform have not been straightforward at all. What the case of WikiLeaks reveals is the need to take a much broader view of the pluralistic system in which such digital technologies now unfold.

WikiLeaks: Strategy and tactics

Launched in late 2006, WikiLeaks became a *cause célèbre*: an independent, non-profit organisation that publishes news documents from anonymous news sources and leaks. Loosely modelled on the participatory platform Wikipedia, WikiLeaks is primarily a platform for a time-honoured tradition: leaking documents. It makes public the new kinds of data government and corporate agencies were able to record and store, that previously would neither have been regarded as worthy of release for scrutiny of citizens, nor as sources for journalists. WikiLeaks established its reputation relatively quickly, receiving an *Index on Censorship* Freedom of Expression award in 2008, cited as 'an invaluable resource for anonymous whistle-blowers and investigative journalists' (*Index on Censorship* 2008). Considering what WikiLeaks represents, it is clear its affordances, as well as its strategics and tactics, go well beyond previous platforms. Let us consider WikiLeaks's tactics and strategies first.

To be sure, WikiLeaks has been able to solicit, obtain, and release documents of the type that are sometimes available to journalists. Following in the wake of internet news ventures before it (notably the Drudge Report: www.drudgereport.com), it showed a bold unconventionality in being prepared to release unfiltered documents. The Drudge Report was one of the first, best-known experiments of its kind in the Anglophone world, because its founder, Matt Drudge, was prepared to release stories on the basis of sources that would usually not be deemed credible according to the norms of journalism. Such norms still influence online news. As I finished this paper (in April 2013), the story about allegations of sexual abuse by another famous expatriate Australian, the entertainer Rolf Harris, broke. Rumours concerning this had been circulated on blogs for some days, before the mainstream media were prepared to name

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Harris – and only then because the police had arrested him for questioning on suspicion of committing sexual offences.

WikiLeaks stakes out a different position on releasing documents online because of its insistence that it deals with 'leaks', rather than unsubstantiated stories *per se*:

> WikiLeaks accepts *classified*, *censored* or otherwise *restricted* material of *political, diplomatic or ethical significance*. WikiLeaks *does not accept* rumour, opinion or other kinds of first hand reporting or material that is already publicly available … Over 100,000 articles catalyzed world-wide. Every source protected. No documents censored. All legal attacks defeated (WikiLeaks 2013b).

As such, WikiLeaks makes a strong claim to be an organisation underpinned and oriented by ethical principles:

> … multi-jurisdictional organization to protect internal dissidents, whistleblowers, journalists and bloggers who face legal or other threats related to publishing. Our primary interest is in exposing oppressive regimes in Asia, the former Soviet bloc, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, but we are of assistance to people of all nations who wish to reveal unethical behavior in their governments and corporations … WikiLeaks opens leaked documents up to stronger scrutiny than any media organization or intelligence agency can provide. WikiLeaks provides a forum for the entire global community to relentlessly examine any document for its credibility, plausibility, veracity and validity (Visser 2009).

A defining story for WikiLeaks was the *Collateral murder* video (http://www.collateral-murder.com/) and ensuing outcry. On 5 April 2010, WikiLeaks released a classified US military video showing a July 2007 incident in which US soldiers in an Apache helicopter attacked and killed Iraqi civilians. After the initial shock and dismay at the conduct of the US personnel depicted in the video, there was a backlash against WikiLeaks for the way in which it published the footage. Severe criticism emanated from the US government, but serious concerns were also raised by wide range of commentators, including comedian Stephen Colbert in a much-noted interview with Assange. Colbert echoed the concerns of many journalists and commentators in questioning the emotional manipulation and de-contextualisation of the video as it was edited for release (Kennedy 2010).

In response to the criticism it received over its *Collateral murder* video, WikiLeaks modified its tactics. This is most evident in its July 2010 release of US military internal logs of the Afghanistan conflict dating 2004-2010 (http://wikileaks.org/afg/). These were reports written by soldiers, military and intelligence personnel, covering US Army and US Special Forces actions. WikiLeaks's editorial board summary of the Afghan logs states:

Unless otherwise specified, the document described here:

- was first publicly revealed by WikiLeaks working with our source;
- was classified, confidential, censored or otherwise withheld from the public before release;
- is of political, diplomatic, ethical or historical significance.

Any questions about this document's veracity are noted (WikiLeaks 2010a).

Until mid-2010, WikiLeaks represented itself as fiercely independent – capable of, and willing to, publish exactly what it wished to, for the interest and examination of the readers and internet users of the world. With the Afghanistan war logs, it formed partnerships with some of the best-known and respected press organs, including the *Guardian*, *New York Times*, and *Der Spiegel*. These media partners made an agreement with WikiLeaks to publish simultaneously their reports regarding the Afghanistan war logs, at the same time as WikiLeaks released the full database on the internet (*Guardian* 2010). WikiLeaks was widely believed to have turned to these lions of the established press to garner credibility (Kennedy 2010). Yet, as it turned out, this was not wholly successful.

The release of the secret material that comprised the Afghan logs not only drew the expected condemnation from the US government, its military, security agencies, and allies. WikiLeaks also attracted strong criticism from journalists and organisations defending press freedom for carelessly releasing the names of many Afghan informants assisting coalition forces. Reporters without Borders and Amnesty International were two respected organisations that criticised WikiLeaks for failing to redact names of individuals at risk from the release of the documents (Siddique 2010). WikiLeaks rejected the criticisms at the time, but later took these on board – as was evident in its next

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sensational and long-running release: Cablegate.

From November 2010 onwards, WikiLeaks steadily released tranches of cables with revelations pertinent to various countries unfolding daily. In total, there were 251,287 diplomatic cables from 250 US embassies around the world containing candid assessments by officials about foreign governments (WikiLeaks 2010b). The material released caused severe discomfiture to many governments around the world, too numerous to mention.

To control the reception of the release of the US embassy cables, WikiLeaks again struck agreements with leading press outlets. There were many advantages to this, including the ability to take advantage of the fact-checking, analysis and interpretation skills of leading journalists. Also the newspapers were able to pick out the aspects of the cables most germane to their national publics and zero in on the points of maximum embarrassment and outrage to their own governments. Last but not least, when Assange was being threatened with assassination and imprisonment, he was able to point to the fact that others – highly regarded newspapers no less – had also published the cables.

With Cablegate, WikiLeaks found a rapprochment with the press. Indeed, WikiLeaks went so far as to cloak itself in the honourable, truth-telling traditions of the Fourth Estate:

> WikiLeaks has combined high-end security technologies with journalism and ethical principles. Like other media outlets conducting investigative journalism, we accept (but do not solicit) anonymous sources of information. Unlike other outlets, we provide a high security anonymous drop box fortified by cutting-edge cryptographic information technologies … We are fearless in our efforts to get the unvarnished truth out to the public. When information comes in, our journalists analyse the material, verify it and write a news piece about it describing its significance to society. We then publish both the news story and the original material in order to enable readers to analyze the story in the context of the original source material themselves (WikiLeaks 2013a).

Elsewhere Assange, with a characteristic flourish, termed this approach 'scientific journalism':

> In 1958 a young Rupert Murdoch, then owner and editor of Adelaide's *The News*, wrote:

'In the race between secrecy and truth, it seems inevitable that truth will always win' … I grew up in a Queensland country town where people spoke their minds bluntly. They distrusted big government as something that could be corrupted if not watched carefully … These things have stayed with me. WikiLeaks was created around these core values. The idea, conceived in Australia, was to use internet technologies in new ways to report the truth. WikiLeaks coined a new type of journalism: scientific journalism. We work with other media outlets to bring people the news, but also to prove it is true. Scientific journalism allows you to read a news story, then to click online to see the original document it is based on. That way you can judge for yourself: Is the story true? Did the journalist report it accurately? Democratic societies need a strong media and WikiLeaks is part of that media (see Kennedy 2010).

Here we see how Assange wishes to present WikiLeaks as disruptive to the existing regime of news and journalism. However, he also insists on the continuity of WikiLeaks within the traditional role of media. Thus, WikiLeaks positions itself clearly as an integral yet critical part of democracy's mainstream media institutions.

What WikiLeaks affords democracy (so far)
Thus far, I have focused on the tactics and strategies that WikiLeaks used between 2008 and 2010 when it achieved international fame. Let me now turn an analysis of the affordances of WikiLeaks and what lessons we might draw from these for the broader account of democratic affordances I am seeking to outline. An obvious affordance of WikiLeaks as a platform is the way it deploys the internet and related information and communication technologies to offer a new kind of online, anonymous conduit for leaking. Different kinds of technologies are deployed to ensure those wishing to leak documents can securely submit a file online (WikiLeaks 2013b). As John Keane notes:

> This 'intelligence agency of the people' (as Assange calls his organisation) did more than harness to the full the defining features of the unfinished communications revolution of our time: the easy-access multimedia integration and low-cost copying of information that is then instantly whizzed around the world through digital networks … For the first time, on a global scale, WikiLeaks created a custom-made mailbox that enabled disgruntled muckrakers within

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any organisation to deposit and store classified data in a camouflaged cloud of servers (Keane 2013b).

Despite this achievement, ironically, the tried-and-tested postal service still receives WikiLeak's highest recommendation: 'Submissions to our postal network offer the strongest form of anonymity and are good for bulk truth-telling' (WikiLeaks 2013b). What is most interesting about how this particular affordance of WikiLeaks has developed is that it is now precisely coupled with a long-standing legal understanding of the status of leaks in journalism:

> All staff who deal with sources are accredited journalists. All submissions establish a journalist-source relationship. Online submissions are routed via Sweden and Belgium which have first rate journalist-source shield laws (ibid).

A submission is no longer simply posted or uploaded to WikiLeaks. Rather, all submissions are deemed to 'establish a journalist-source relationship'. In addition, WikiLeaks is a global media platform, but it becomes a 'glocal' form when it chooses the most desirable potential defence of sources. While WikiLeaks has chosen to limit its conceptualisation of its role, the affordances of the platform potentially go much wider. To appreciate the scope of WikiLeaks, it is helpful to return to a less well-known episode in the WikiLeaks story so far.

In 2009, Wikileaks released a set of data containing a distinctive record of the events of the terrorist attacks of 9/11:

> From 3am on Wednesday November 25, 2009, until 3am the following day (US east coast time), WikiLeaks released half a million US national text pager intercepts. The intercepts cover a 24-hour period surrounding the 11 September 2001 attacks in New York and Washington. The messages were broadcast 'live' to the global community – sychronized to the time of day they were sent … Text pagers are usually carried by persons operating in an official capacity. Messages in the archive range from Pentagon, FBI, FEMA and New York Police Department exchanges, to computers reporting faults at investment banks inside the World Trade Center. The archive is a completely objective record of the defining moment of our time. We hope that its entrance into the historical record will lead to a nuanced understanding of how this event led to death, opportunism and war (WikiLeaks 2009).

As released by WikiLeaks, the intercepted messages represent a mosaic of communications responding to the breaking event, flows of everyday media from individuals and organisations:

> 7:05:57 am
> Please don't leave the building. One of the towers just collapsed! Please, please be careful. Repeat,
>
> 11:00:30 am
> BOMB SQUAD PLS REPORT TO EDIC..PER T913..OPS/JL ...
>
> 5:20:30 pm
> Honey wanted to tell you how much i love you. I was alittle worried. I Don't want to lose you now that I got you back. You mean everything to me. You have my whole heart and life. I love you so much,
>
> 6:05:05 pm
> We are bombing Afganistan. Pene
>
> 6:58:58 pm
> 1) my nephew's ok, 2) there's a dead body at the main gate, 3) US denies responsibility for bombing in Afghanistan. Over and out (quoted in Huffington Post 2009).

The messages show the banality as much as the vivid, poignant nature of reaction to 9/11, in this slice of US society.

If we consider how the 9/11 text pager data of WikiLeaks fits into accounts of journalism and news, the obvious starting point is the long-established role of the press in uncovering and reporting news, based on new caches or archives of documents. Such documents themselves serve as the basic, factual evidence to ground the veracity of such stories and clinch their legitimacy. With the rise of notions of open government and, specifically, the concept of freedom of information *vis-à-vis* government and public sector information, journalists and newspapers have often reproduced and discussed sets of documents. The advent of the world wide web has provided greater capacity for the press to provide the underlying or accompanying documents themselves for readers to consult and interpret. This direction in openness is greatly extended by WikiLeaks's release of the 9/11 text pager data.

News stories often rely on intercepts of many telephone calls, emails, or text messsages. Usually, however, a few key telephone calls of messages are described and reproduced – as

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a 'smoking gun', to provide the establishing evidence. It is typically then left to archiving, collecting, or cultural institutions – libraries, national archives, museums – to serve as repositories for such information, so it can be preserved for historical, research, and cultural heritage purposes. WikiLeaks's release 'disintermediates' the gamut of institutions, from the press through to libraries and archives and universities. It makes available to anyone who has access and can use the internet to peruse, download, and make sense of these records. The 9/11 text pager data release is an early sign of the extraordinary affordances of WikiLeaks's platform. We might extend this argument further, however.

As WikiLeaks made plain at the time, the 9/11 message data release is only possible because of the routine surveillance of citizens in everyday life. The source of the messages was a US organisation that intercepts all manner of data communications traffic, from the commanding heights of state security organisations such as the Pentagon and FBI, through police and emergency organisations, to interpersonal communications and computer generated communications. This kind of networked, informational society operates on data networks and data communications, that, in turn, may be surveilled, aggregated, archived, and analysed. In this sense, WikiLeaks has drawn attention to the lineaments of the data-intensive architecture of everyday life in polities such as the US; then, through its release of a sample of the data, is able to make a signal intervention, to pierce the veil of this 'dataveillance' (Amore and de Goede 2005, Clark 1994). Thus it adds a further twist to the 'social life' of such data (Brown and Duguid 2000), creating a democratic temper from its affordances.

To sum up, in a relatively short space of time, WikiLeaks has moved from being a radical outlier, experimenting with the potential of the internet to create a new media force – to something that works much more hand-in-glove with the organs of the press it hoped to trump with 'higher scrutiny' (cf. Allan 2013). There are, then, two principal lessons to be drawn from this case study in digital technology, media, and democracy.

Firstly, there is extraordinary potential for socio-technical innovation in creating digital platforms. WikiLeaks's affordances in their 'raw' form – witness the *Collateral murder*, war logs, and 9/11 data releases – clearly disrupted the existing circuits that connect democracy

with media. In a powerful, stark, profound, and troubling sense, WikiLeaks has sketched the possibility for a new communicative architecture for democracy.

Secondly, the social and cultural shaping of WikiLeaks's platform and the power relations in which they unfolded, revealed the complexity of designing and implementing such platforms for democratic means and ends. For its instigators, the potential capacities of WikiLeaks at its birth appeared revolutionary and straightforward. As it has turned out, however, the interactions among journalism, news, and the digital in this novel platform have not been straightforward at all. The affordances of WikiLeaks as a platform have extraordinary potential to transform journalism and media. Yet the democratic implications of these affordances have been far more ambiguous and at times reactionary than could possibly have been foreseen (cf. Lovink 2011, Brevini et al. 2013).

An obvious test of the democratic potential and effects of media relates to a judgement concerning the closely linked issues of accountability, transparency, and governance. Especially once WikiLeaks became a household name, the transparency of WikiLeaks was not only being assailed by governments (most spectacularly in US elected representatives' threats to the liberty and life of Assange) – it was also questioned by a range of independent commentators and civil society actors. The secretive nature of WikiLeaks, the complexity of its organisational, financial and legal status, and the closeted, cell-like nature of its governance model, raised legitimate queries (Domscheit-Berg 2011). These critiques of WikiLeaks occurred before Julian Assange was required by authorities to return to Sweden for questioning in relation to allegations of sexual assault.

Assange's attempt to evade the Swedish authorities led him in June 2012 to seek asylum in Ecuadorian embassy in London. Ecuador's President Rafael Correa has been widely regarded as a lion of the Left, but since at least 2010 has sought to muzzle his country's press. As a *Guardian* journalist noted, serious concerns about Ecuadorian press freedom emerged from the very US diplomatic cables published by WikiLeaks in Cablegate (Assange 2012b). Yet Assange has pointedly declined to discuss Ecuador's woeful recent record on press freedom (Carter 2012). Assange and WikiLeaks are certainly not alone in exhibiting such contradictions on freedom of expression and press freedom. The fact that Assange is not prepared

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to address satisfactorily such central issues raises further doubts about the potential of WikiLeaks to realise its own vision to integrate the traditional conceptions of journalism and media's relationship to democracy, on the one hand, with new ideas and affordances.

Conclusion: Digital architectures for democratic communications

The case of WikiLeaks is an important reminder of how much imaginative work needs to be done in order to make such digital platforms genuinely democratic in their affordances. It is with good reason that WikiLeaks has exerted such fascination and controversy alike among those interested in how to design digital technology to make contemporary media a much more powerful, ethical force for democracy and justice.

The problem with WikiLeaks, as I see it, is not just its questionable approach to media ethics and accountability which is, it could be argued, an inevitable consequence of an organisation beseiged by the might of the US and other Western countries, and their intelligence, security, and finance agencies (Leigh and Harding 2011). Nor is the issue with WikiLeaks simply the problems that come from having such a charismatic and compelling defining figure as Assange. Rather, I suggest the main problem with WikiLeaks is that not enough attention has been given by its creators – or, indeed, its supporters, analysts, or detractors – to considering what its affordances are, and how they might be skewed, or inflected, towards democratic media and ethics.

This may seem an unfair criticism to make of a project such as WikiLeaks which has made such inroads into lifting the lid on some of the most explosive and important issues of the day. I certainly am keen to acknowledge the remarkable success of WikiLeaks in shining such a bright light on the fissures of contemporary mainstream politics. However, as I hope my analysis has shown, in the passage of WikiLeaks towards a rapprochment with traditional journalism and news, something has been lost in capturing, extending, and refining the democratic affordances of its platform.

WikiLeaks is but one of many platforms currently emerging or evolving – along with Politifact, crowdsourcing in elections, text messaging, Facebook and the new blog and web-based independent quality journalism. Indeed, we need a mix of digital platforms which, taken together, could make an important contribution to a reliable, enduring, open media ecology in which democracy flourishes. It is widely agreed that our traditional media can no longer provide what citizens require, even with the balance of public service media, community, alternative, and personal media thrown into the bargain. We are certainly in the heyday of innovation of digital platforms for democracy, so I would be the last to put a dampener on this ferment. However, we do need a much more rigorous and vigorous debate about the democratic affordances they provide. And where such platforms fit into the ensemble of media we need in order to create, recreate, and sustain democratic private and public life.

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