Sourced in, unsourced out:
Leaking as the common knowledge production

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On 4 December 2010, Wikileaks updated its twitter status to a victorious statement: " 'Wikileaks' now twice as known as 'Wikipedia' according to Google."[1] The search query at the same day confirmed that 'wikileaks' returned 443 million compared to 208 million results of 'wikipedia' search. The popularity of Wikileaks at the time came as no surprise, since by publishing a plethora of US diplomatic cables through selected major printed media, it catapulted itself to the centre of global media attention. But why was the campaigner for "exposing oppresive regimes" comparing itself to Wikipedia? There seemed to be no other indication of what do these two initiatives had in common, rather than use of wiki system for content management.

Wikileaks got to be known through its wiki interface as early as in 2007. Wiki seemed as a natural choice. Organisation consisted of a handful of individuals, and ran on a small budget. Locating the proofs of corruption in myriads of leaked documents was not only highly time-consuming, but also required expertise in legal, financial, and diplomatic jargon. Wiki engine served as both a publishing platform and environment for involving anonymous users in analysing, commenting, and summarising the material. They made their source of inspiration explicit by defining the project as "uncensorable version of Wikipedia for untraceable mass document leaking and analysis"[2]. This already implied the antagonistic stance towards its older and much larger twin, accused of censorship.

Backtracing the ambivalent relations between the two, there were more occasions. Julian Assange, one of the Wikileaks spokespersons at the time, appeared at the prestigious Oslo Freedom Forum conference on 26 April 2010. He used the opportunity to describe intention of his organisation in a grand manner: "In the broader framework of what we do, [we] try and build a historical record, an intellectual record, of how civilisation actually works in practice, now, from the inside, everywhere, in every country around the world. Because all our decisions, individual decisions, our political decisions, are based upon what we know."[3] One can easily read the implicit reference to Wikipedia's mission to serve as an universal encyclopedia. But why such a bold statement? Wikipedia, successful in attracting thousands of volunteers to build unprecedented organised record of knowledge and now functioning as major intellectual reference, served as a role model for Wikileaks. This however still does not explain rivalry one can sense from Wikileaks' statements.

Assange clarified his stance at another occasion. He talked to students of journalism at UC Berkeley on 18 April 2010:

> "Our initial idea which never got implemented our initial idea was that, look at all those people editing Wikipedia. Look at all the *junk* that they're working on. Surely, if you give them a fresh classified document about the human rights atrocities in Falluja, that the rest of the world has not seen before, surely all *those*

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[1] http://twitter.com/wikileaks/status/11002485711835136

[2] http://replay.web.archive.org/20070928101508/http://wikileaks.org/wiki/Wikileaks:About

[3] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qDvfQ5gZ-Jw. Transcript: http://www.religiousforums.com/forum/political-debates/101236-transcript-julian-assange-wikileaks-speech-2010-a.html

people that are busy working on articles about history and mathematics and so on, and all those bloggers that are busy pontificating about the abuses in Iraq and Afghanistan and other countries and other human rights disasters, who are complaining that they can only respond to the New York Times, because they don't have sources of their own, surely those people will step forward, given fresh source material and do something... But no. It's all bullshit. It's all bullshit. In fact, people write about things, in general (if it's not part of their career), because they want to display their values to their peers, who are already in the same group. Actually, they don't give a fuck about the material. That's the reality."[4]

This gives us a hint about Assange's original attempts to make an indication of corruption part of common knowledge by submitting the secret documents to Wikipedia and expecting community to process and summarize this raw material. Clearly, his disillusionment stemmed out from the fact that Wikipedians kept on editing out the secret documents he was submitting to it. Did not they really care? This does require a look into Wikipedia's content policy.

Wikipedia editors follow transparently organised content policy based on three core principles. All articles are required to be written from "neutral point of view", which stands for "fair, proportional and unbiased" representation of views published by "reliable sources". Secondly, the threshold for inclusion is "verifiability" of material towards "reliable sources", instead of personal reasoning about its truth value. And finally, articles must not contain "original research", in other words editors are only allowed to include material already published by "reliable sources". Combination of these principles is believed to determine the content acceptable for Wikipedia.[5] [6] [7]

In short, Wikipedia adheres exclusively to "reliable sources" which include academic publications, publications by "respected publishing houses", and mainstream media. It states with no mercy: "If no reliable third-party sources can be found on a topic, Wikipedia should not have an article on it."

What Wikipedia considers as the unsourced submissions and candidates for deletion, constitutes, quite on the contrary, the type of documents Wikileaks receives from its sources. To meet its maxim, the organisation operates upon protection of its sources. Since the sources, whistleblowers, are anonymous, the documents submitted to the group are verified through personal links elsewhere. Wikileaks.org openly claims the "truth" as a threshold for inclusion, a defining property of its content. In addition, it principially provides original material as the documents were previously not published by other sources. Wikileaks documents simply do not hold up to criteria set by Wikipedia. Instead the organisation, being far from

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[4]http://zunguzungu.wordpress.com/2010/12/12/julian-assange-in-berkeley/

[5]http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Neutral_point_of_view

[6]http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Verifiability

[7]http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Reliable_sources

possessing credit to be treated as "reliable source", set up "uncensorable" version of what Assange perceived as the historical intellectual record of knowledge about civilisation. Its own content policy stands in a direct opposition to Wikipedia.

As a result, two initiatives realise the identical vision of producing the universal common knowledge by strikingly different means. Encouraging participation of everyone with access to internet, they developed different principles and methods for deciding which submissions are to be linked to common knowledge. Wikipedia content relies exclusively on academic and mainstream publishing, having the community synthesizing it following transparently set consensual conventions. On the other hand, Wikileaks content depends on the leakers, who are usually part of public institutions or have access to public representatives. Confidential material they anonymously provide is privately analysed by members of small organisation and their peers following internal rules. We have two different schemas of common knowledge production here.

For Assange, the quick Google search for 'wikipedia' and 'wikileaks' in early December 2010 was a moment of private victory. He managed to arrive at better way of delivering knowledge to public than Wikipedia. At the time, WikiLeaks no longer used the wiki engine. It was abandoned and replaced by partnership with influential global mass media for the purpose of gradual publication of massive databases dealing with US interventions in world affairs (Iraq War, Afghanistan War, diplomatic cables, Guantanamo files). Anonymous wiki editors were replaced by hired team of professional journalists working under highly secretive conditions. Editing process became completely private business.

What used to be the activist anti-corruption open data initiative was later transformed to alternative "uncensorable" Wikipedia clone, to finally fully adapt to the model of mainstream publishing, which in turn Wikipedia considers as the "reliable source", candidate for inclusion in common knowledge, as they see it.

Data leaked through Wikileaks eventually, by circulation in mainstream media, finds its way to Wikipedia. Paradoxically, reliability of Wikileaks documents can now be verified against Wikipedia.

References

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[2] Žižek, S (2007) "Censorship Today: Violence, or Ecology as a New Opium for the Masses". http://www.lacan.com/zizecology1.htm