information in new ways. WikiLeaks' significance is that it is part of the shift in the nature of news to a process, a network system, that is contestable and unstable. Welcome to Wiki World and the era of uncertainty.

WHAT WAS NEW ABOUT WIKILEAKS?

1.1 THE CREATION OF WIKILEAKS

WikiLeaks is no longer a Wiki. Indeed, Jimmy Wales, the founder of the online encyclopedia Wikipedia is somewhat irritated by the way their shared word-stems make people link the two organizations. Wikipedia is a collaborative online information resource that is written and edited by volunteers. It has rules but it is an open-source, participatory production model. It is regularly cited as one of the digital age's greatest achievements. It is also hailed as a triumph of the free Internet's ability to create an unprecedented resource out of networked knowledge and interactive connectivity.

Despite its name, WikiLeaks, as the world has now come to know it, does not operate in the same way. Back in 2008 the WikiLeaks 'Frequently Asked Questions' or 'FAQs' section did make the comparison:
WikiLeaks looks like Wikipedia. Anybody can post comments to it. No technical knowledge is required. Whistleblowers can post documents anonymously and untraceably. Users can publicly discuss documents and analyze their credibility and veracity. Users can discuss the latest material, read and write explanatory articles on leaks along with background material and context. The political relevance of documents and their veracity can be revealed by a cast of thousands. 

However, while in practice it moved away from this open-system model, it does share some of that conceptual grounding in the way it exploits the unique affordances of the World Wide Web. It could only exist thanks to the Internet. WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and colleagues like Daniel Domscheit-Berg emerged from a ‘hacker’ culture, but WikiLeaks itself soon moved away from the idea of penetrating other people’s systems. Much of its early material was alleged to have consisted of trawled files left on peer-to-peer networks, either unintentionally or as the result of system hacks. However, it soon became instead a safe haven for the produce of other people’s deliberate ‘whistle-blowing’ to WikiLeaks: ‘We don’t have targets, other than organizations that use secrecy to conceal unjust behavior... that’s created a general target. Otherwise we’re completely source-dependent. We are a source-protection organization and a publishing-protection organization.’ As we look at the emergence of WikiLeaks we can see how it forged a particularly effective, though not unique, model as a kind of hybrid publisher of last resort.

In this first chapter, we will examine where WikiLeaks comes from and the landscape into which it emerged. We will trace its roots through the ‘hacktivist’ movements which sought to penetrate into closed corporate or governmental information systems to extract data. Much like smaller, more skilled versions of today’s Anonymous network of computer activists, some hackers did this for the challenge, for profit or for fun, but others because they had political goals. From these groups, the co-founders of what became WikiLeaks emerged.

Julian Assange is credited as the co-author of a 2001 book by technology researcher Suelette Dreyfus chronicling the hacktivist culture of the time. *Underground: Tales of Hacking, Madness, and Obsession on the Electronic Frontier* featured the characters behind a series of hacks, including the defence and intelligence hacks carried out by ‘Mendax’, Assange’s hacker alter-ego.

Characteristically, Julian Assange became convinced the book should be published online, in its entirety, for free. As the preface to the electronic edition shows, he got his way. “Why would an author give away an unlimited number of copies of her book for free?” —That’s a good question— Dreyfus wrote; “When “Underground”’s researcher, Julian Assange, first suggested releasing an electronic version of the book on the Net for free, I had to stop and think about just that question.”

As Dreyfus explains, the book is a hackers’ perspective of the electronic underground:

Who are hackers? Why do they hack? There are no simple answers to these questions. Each hacker is different. To that end, I have attempted to present a collection of individual but interconnected stories. While each hacker has a distinct story, there are common themes which appear throughout many of the stories. Rebellion against all symbols of authority. Dysfunctional families. Bright children suffocated by ill-equipped teachers. Mental illness or instability. Obsession and addiction.
This attempt to understand the psychological elements of the hacker culture does seem appropriate in the light of later developments regarding Assange’s personal life and the dominant role his personality played in WikiLeaks’ history. His character-forming upbringing, raised by his mother on her own, constantly changing homes and schools, mixing with an eclectic range of adults, helped to forge an Internet innovator. Suelette Dreyfus, the book’s primary author, remains involved with Assange and with WikiLeaks, and is referred to as “The Nanny” in Daniel Domscheit-Berg’s account of his time with WikiLeaks.2

After his conviction for his hacking activities in Australia, Assange studied maths, physics, philosophy and neuroscience at the University of Melbourne, though he did not complete his studies. During this period, his ideas around leaking were becoming more solid. In 1999, a full seven years before the birth of WikiLeaks, Julian Assange registered the domain leaks.org. “But”, he told an interviewer, “I didn’t do anything with it.”3 However, seven years later, the different strands of thinking began to coalesce, as Assange and others began discussing the formation of WikiLeaks.

WikiLeaks.org was registered in 4 October 2006, with its first material appearing two months later in December 2006. Alongside was the claim that it was “founded by Chinese dissidents, journalists, mathematicians and start-up company technologists, from the US, Taiwan, Europe, Australia and South Africa”. As is often the case with WikiLeaks, the core team was actually a lot smaller than its public relations claimed. It consisted largely of Assange and individuals from the ‘Chaos Computer Club’, a German group of pro-transparency hackers.4 WikiLeaks’ claimed membership was rather larger than reality, and its initial impact was also more modest than its publicity had suggested.

The site claimed to have over 1 million documents ready to leak. It launched with just one: a document purporting to be from an Islamic resistance group in Somalia, allegedly leaked via the Chinese government. A ‘health warning’ assessing the document’s veracity was published alongside. It warned that WikiLeaks had been unable to verify completely whether the document was genuine or not, though it gave evidence why the site believed it to be genuine. WikiLeaks was not challenged on the veracity of the document by either the Chinese government or Somali groups.

Many of WikiLeaks’ earliest plans at this stage were revealed – paradoxically – through leaked documents.5 An email sent to early supporters and collaborators, for example, stated that the site planned to ‘numerically eclipse the content of the English Wikipedia with leaked documents’. The early users were political activists, promising to ‘provide a catalyst which will bring down government through stealth everywhere, not least that of the Bushists’.6

Conversations within WikiLeaks revolved around the difficulty of verifying leaked documents and the need for honesty in analysis. The key internal debate was the struggle to remain collegiate and sustain ethical behaviour. Occasional comments look profoundly insightful in retrospect: ‘We’re on an exponential; we have no forces working against us yet, but there will be many in a few months and these early discussions may take on an unexpected poignancy.’7

Other key insights from the time come from John Young, the founder of the oldest well-known leaking website on the Internet: cryptome.org. Since 1996 Cryptome has accepted open submissions, and publishes documents largely unre-reviewed and free of accompanying editorial, almost daily. Concentrating mainly on the fields of security and technology, it has never achieved the wider profile or controversial impact of WikiLeaks, despite featuring in many stories over the years.
Young, in whose name WikiLeaks.org was initially registered to protect the anonymity of other contributors, was often the voice of caution in the discussion threads:

Leaks should be doubted and doubts answered by leakers or those who distribute the leakables. An iron-clad leak is a phony or a lie. It does require more work to perform an exegesis of a leaked document weighing the pros and cons, but that is what it takes to avoid the trap of vainglorious pride in being a leaker and the subsequent lure of leaking crap to remain in the spotlight – the politician's disease.15

WikiLeaks had a strong early claim to a pioneering role in the development of information security. Assange refers to the part he played in setting up hidden open-source encryption standards. These enable WikiLeaks and its sources to hold and disseminate information unreadable by anyone else in the world, including security services. WikiLeaks uses such protocols today in its publicly available, but heavily encrypted, ‘insurance’ file. This is the password to a package of information intended for release should anything untoward happen to Assange. The same security guards its other mechanisms such as its (offline at the time of writing) submissions system. Though WikiLeaks has often suffered its own leaks, and even on occasion lost control of its material, its encryption technology is sophisticated and effectively unbreakable. WikiLeaks uses a form of encryption known as 256-bit AES, similar to that used by online banking sites, and the military and intelligence agencies themselves. With a sufficiently strong and well-protected password, breaking in to such a file would take several million times longer than the lifespan of the universe.16

Such robust security precautions didn’t mean the initial running of the site was entirely smooth. Even in 2007 – before most of the world had noticed the site existed – WikiLeaks had its first brush with internal dissent, and within the early months of 2008 the site had received its first major legal threat.

The leaked emails quoted above are part of a huge document dump from WikiLeaks' earliest days, made by Cryptome's John Young. By January 2007, a WikiLeaker, believed to be Assange, had posted that 'it is our goal to raise pledges of $5m by July', a goal the site is still far from reaching. This declaration of financial ambition provoked a strong reaction from Young. He posted a series of warnings to the email list of WikiLeaks activists on the risks of such ambitious goals and rhetoric. 'Announcing a $5 million fundraising goal by July will kill this effort. It makes WL appear to be a Wall Street scam. This amount could not be needed so soon except for suspect purposes,' he wrote. Scepticism unleashed, he continued:

I'd say the same about the alleged 1.1 million documents ready for leaking. Way too many to be believable without evidence. I don't believe the number. So far, one document, of highly suspect provenance.

Instead, explain what funding needs there are and present a schedule for their need, avoid generalities and lump sums. Explain how the funds will be managed and protected against fraud and theft. The biggest crooks brag overmuch of how ethical their operations are. Avoid ethical promises, period, they've been used too often to fleece victims. Demonstrate sustained ethical behavior, don't preach; peddle it.

In another comment posted just twenty minutes later, Young concluded WikiLeaks was a 'fraud'. He then published the anonymized contents of the WikiLeaks mailing
list on his own site. Two years later, a non-anonymized version of WikiLeaks' 108-strong donors' list was again leaked, this time as a result of an email error by Assange himself.

The teething troubles did not slow WikiLeaks' momentum, or revelations. One of WikiLeaks' first stories, exposing widespread corruption in Kenya's elite, for example, showed how it was able to exploit its transnational status to override state controls and to put highly controversial information into the public domain. WikiLeaks had published a confidential report produced by a UK security intelligence company, Kroll Associates, in April 2004, into corruption in Kenya. It found the still-influential former President of Kenya had laundered public money to buy property overseas in the UK, New York, South Africa and Australia. The revelations were linked — by Assange at least — to the riots and civil unrest which accompanied the December 2007 elections in the country: '1,300 people were eventually killed, and 350,000 were displaced. That was a result of our leak ... On the other hand, the Kenyan people had a right to that information and 40,000 children a year die of malaria in Kenya. And many more die of money being pulled out of Kenya, and as a result of the Kenyan shilling being debased.'

With this leak, WikiLeaks had shown it could publish an explosive secret report that Kenyan media did not have access to or did not feel able to make public for fear of reprisal. It also indicated that WikiLeaks, and Assange in particular, were prepared to make a different risk calculation that accepted some incidental harm for the 'greater good' of transparency. Regardless of the degree to which WikiLeaks did substantially influence events in reality, the Kenyan leaks were very much a herald of things to come.

So, not surprisingly, its targets were now fighting back. WikiLeaks has only once been taken offline through legal action, and never for longer than 24 hours by technical means. Swiss bank Julius Baer, in a February 2008 action, managed to injunct Dynadot, the US company hosting the site's DNS servers. This was the service which routed users from the WikiLeaks.org web address to WikiLeaks' European-hosted servers.

As UK celebrities have since found, however, injunctions are a risky business. Web forums, blogs and other users were quick to point to the direct IP address to WikiLeaks, and to other web addresses effectively linking to the information that the bank had sought to suppress. Within a month of the original injunction being issued, the Julius Baer bank had dropped their case and the site was reinstated and normal WikiLeaks service resumed.

Julius Assange is proud to report, as a result of this and other, lesser, ultimately unsuccessful legal challenges to the site, that the organization has never lost a courtroom battle. But Dynadot was correctly identified as a weak link in the WikiLeaks chain. Two years later, when US Senator Joe Lieberman called on American companies to boycott WikiLeaks, the loss of Amazon's web servers took the site offline for mere hours. The loss of Dynadot forced the WikiLeaks.org website to move to the WikiLeaks.ch web address for several months before the original domain name was recovered in May 2011.

So what was new about WikiLeaks in its first two years? Above all, it had shown and would continue to demonstrate that it was able to operate with impunity. It had no home base and was not a legal entity in any one country. In effect it had become a stateless media organization. While Assange was living out of a suitcase, WikiLeaks was living in cyberspace. Its physical servers may have been in Sweden or Germany, but its networks of supporters and mirrored sites meant it existed everywhere and nowhere. This is fundamentally different from traditional news media. Conventional
mass media’s whole relationship to power and its ethical framework is conditioned by the fact that they can be held to account by national and international regulations and laws. Even in the most free-market and open self-regulatory media systems, these apply. In many ways, WikiLeaks is much more a legal revolution in contemporary media than a technological one.

In addition to the legal constraints, there are other responsibilities or restrictions on journalism that are normally part of the trade-off between freedom of expression and the rights of wider society to privacy and fair representation. These include cultural assumptions about a sense of ‘fair play’ or balance and accuracy in reporting. These are widely abused and hugely variable from one media outlet or market to another – even within Western liberal democracies. But they exist and they characterize mainstream news media as an information system with codes of behaviour that are internally constructed as well as externally enforced. From them flow ideas such as ‘objectivity’, a concept itself with different interpretations from nation to nation. Around them are created the kind of media institutions that protect these ideas, sustain these cultures and gather the resources to deliver the product they create. These may vary in practice from the public-sector bodies like the BBC to the corporate, such as Fox News. But from The Times in New York or London to The Times in Brownsville, Oregon, the mainstream news organizations have in common a physical, social and legal presence. By escaping from the constraints of law and location, WikiLeaks accessed a much greater potential freedom. Impunity from law gives it immunity from the consequences of the wider settlement between journalism and society. This grants WikiLeaks unprecedented and, so far, unreplicated legal freedom, but also a less-reported but similarly liberating degree of ethical and moral flexibility.

Yet, in many other respects, WikiLeaks in this first phase has the characteristics of conventional journalism. The idea of a leaker, for example, is as old as journalism itself. Those sending material to WikiLeaks may have been using new technologies such as encryption or, more prosaically, email. Certainly, Bradley Manning allegedly exploited the weakness of an incredibly powerful digital information system. The technology allowed leaks of unprecedented scale but the motives and actions are timeless. The methodology and morality were typical of whistle-blowing to journalists throughout media history. It usually takes something quite exceptional to make someone betray the trust of their employers or associates. It can be personal or political, petty or principled. The news media have always relied on it and most journalism regulatory systems make special allowance for the public interest justification of breaking the law, or at least of publishing the results of what is often a crime.

Like traditional mainstream media, WikiLeaks also had an editor and a newsroom – of sorts – that processed the information. In later stages, they would edit and package the material too. Even with unedited material there is a degree of contextualization of most of the important leaks. The Kenyan leak, for example, has an introduction written by ‘WikiLeaks staff’ that gives a political context for the document. It also gives links to sources that help establish its veracity and even asserts a motive for the leak itself: ‘The leak which emanated from within high levels of the Kenyan Government is motivated by the desire to demonstrate that President Kibaki has clear-cut evidence of his predecessor’s corruption and complicity in corruption, and has chosen to suppress the evidence and worse still has gone into a political and economic alliance with the Moi group.’

So, from its ‘pure’ Wiki construct, we see in this phase how the organization is constantly evolving in the direction
of traditional newsroom practice. This is at a time coincidentally, when mainstream media newsrooms themselves were shifting towards more networked forms of journalism involving crowd-sourcing, blogging and public participation. Just like any mainstream mass media organization, WikiLeaks clearly wanted a wide audience and to have an impact on society. It did not see itself as a niche or personal project. WikiLeaks' staff believed passionately that they were revealing hidden facts that the wider public needed to be aware of and even act upon. All these are familiar elements of certain kinds of traditional campaigning journalism. In this sense the argument about whether WikiLeaks should be defined as journalism is cyclical. Those who argue that WikiLeaks is not 'journalism' are defining the term to exclude forms of news mediation that they do not wish to give an official stamp. Those who argue that WikiLeaks easily fits into their definition of journalism are in danger of ignoring how it challenges the validity of those categories. The debate about 'WikiLeaks as Journalism' is really a debate about what journalism is or is becoming. Instead of asking whether WikiLeaks is journalism or not, we should ask 'What kind of journalism is WikiLeaks creating?' The challenge to the rest of journalism is to come up with something as good, if not better.

1.2 THE CHALLENGE OF WIKILEAKS TO ALTERNATIVE JOURNALISM

WikiLeaks can be said to provide a challenge to much of conventional journalism, but it also interrogates the idea of so-called 'alternative media': the journalism that self-consciously sets itself apart from the dominant ideology or practice of mainstream news media. During its development it experimented with many of the forms and means used by the alternative media across the web. As well as its basic 'drop box' function, it used novel online practices such as Wikis, crowd-sourcing, forums, and email lists. Implicit in the use of these was a production philosophy that was participatory and open source. As it adapted, rejected and shifted from alternative, collaborative methods to its current hybrid status, it has created models but also highlighted many problems for those in the more experimental and less orthodox parts of the media landscape.

In this first phase of WikiLeaks between 2006 and 2009 we see how its organization and activities contrast with mainstream journalism. At this point it appears to fit into a classic definition of alternative media. At its simplest, 'alternative' is a negative distinction that means doing journalism that the mainstream does not. It can be an alternative to mainstream in content, style, organization, production processes, distribution methods and its relationship with the public, but - perhaps above all - in its purpose or aims.

WikiLeaks is independent of commercial, corporate, government or lobby-group control or ownership. It is a non-membership, non-profit organization funded by donations, with no governance structure. In its earliest days, an 'advisory board' was constantly under discussion, with attempts made to recruit, but this was never expected to have any overall ultimate control over the collective. There is no mutual ownership or control so it seemed more like an anarchist cell than a co-operative collective. It had overt political aims, though no clear policy-related programme. Its central aim was to foment change. A quote from an email leaked by Cryptome read: 'We feel that per hour spent this provides the greatest positive impact on the world and ourselves that is within our means to achieve.'

However, it did not conform to the model of an NGO or public advocacy group. So while it was awarded prizes by
NGOs such as the UK branch of Amnesty International did not want to be part of their world. According to some accounts, there were a few important people who contributed to its evolution and management at this stage, but Julian Assange was, in effect, to become the dominant and controlling figure.

At this early stage WikiLeaks was also quite different from the online campaigning groups such as MoveOn in America, which are essentially digital activism platforms seeking to promote or widen political engagement. WikiLeaks was about information, not practical politics. WikiLeaks at this stage appeared to have more in common with initiatives like Cryptome, which was, as we have seen, actually connected to WikiLeaks in its earliest phase. This is a website which since 1996 has provided information — including leaked documents — about intelligence and security issues:

Cryptome welcomes documents for publication that are prohibited by governments worldwide, in particular material on freedom of expression, privacy, cryptography, dual-use technologies, national security, intelligence, and secret governance — open, secret and classified documents — but not limited to those. Documents are removed from this site only by order served directly by a US court having jurisdiction. No court order has ever been served; any order served will be published here — or elsewhere if gagged by order. Bluffs will be published if comical but otherwise ignored.

Cryptome differed markedly even at this point from WikiLeaks, as a much more ideologically coherent project. It is an avowedly niche anti-hegemonic site with an academic underpinning. As we have seen, the main author John Young became a strong critic of WikiLeaks, implying it had compromised by its associations with mainstream media and a failure to maintain a strict anti-capitalist agenda. Despite starting up in 1996, Cryptome has failed to achieve the impact or profile WikiLeaks managed to attain within its first few years. In that sense it was the kind of classic semi-underground, rigorously alternative media organization that Assange was keen for WikiLeaks not to become. He personally had much larger ambitions:

We all only live once. So we are obligated to make good use of the time that we have and to do something that is meaningful and satisfying. This is something that I find meaningful and satisfying. That is my temperament. I enjoy creating systems on a grand scale, and I enjoy helping people who are vulnerable. And I enjoy crushing bastards. So it is enjoyable work.

In what way was this ambition to 'crush bastards' consistent with a typology of alternative political media? Assange certainly wanted to be an alternative to mainstream media. He was critical of what he saw as its complicity in covering up injustice in authoritarian states as well as liberal democracies: ‘we in the West have deluded ourselves into believing that we actually have a truly free press. We don’t. And we can see that in the difference between what WikiLeaks does and what the rest of the press does.’

However, he was never particularly interested in creating an alternative audience. Indeed, early users were urged to share what they learned on WikiLeaks with local mainstream outlets to promulgate the news. This flew in the face of the typical route for much of the political blogosphere.

Some sites, such as liberal group blog 'The Daily Kos' in America, have achieved substantial scale. However, it is not an ideological challenge to either mainstream media or politics. It seeks to influence the mainstream agenda not
to subvert it. In contrast, groups like the radical UK news aggregator Indymedia were prepared to sacrifice reach in favour of a more distinct positioning that satisfied a particular ‘anti-globalization’ audience. However, it has had almost no impact on wider public attitudes, nor has it managed to influence the mainstream political or media agenda. Assange realized that to effect immediate political change he needed to reach out to a mass audience that could mobilize public opinion to put pressure on those in power, especially given the naïve-anarchic view in WikiLeaks’ earliest days that the publication of leaks alone would change history:

you should remember Solzhenitsyn’s words, that, ‘In the right moment, one word of truth outweighs the world.’ Solzhenitsyn was referring to a world of lies. But this still is true of free information across the world, and it’s also true of the information in the West, that, in some cases, one classified video can possibly stop a war, and maybe fifty – definitely can.\(^2\)

Assange showed no special desire to work with civil society organizations or political groups to achieve these aims. In WikiLeaks’ earliest days, none of those were willing to fund the radical project. While happy to accept the Kudos of an Index on Censorship award, he was unwilling to work with them until much later. While these organizations sought to have a progressive, reformist relationship with those in power, Assange wanted to disrupt the systems that sustained those in authority. Critically, he does not identify an ideological stance or a political issue in particular that he is opposing, but the role of knowledge in politics itself:

What most people see is an illusion. Because what most people get is news that comes from press releases. Or it’s news that even comes from a human rights organization that is writing news in part to tell you something but also in part to keep its funding. And most information that comes to you is targeted at you. It is designed in some small way to manipulate you, so it is a deviation from the truth. But the internal documents of major corporations and intelligence agencies and governments are designed for their internal use. For some internal process that is occurring, some internal logistical structure. They’re not designed to manipulate you. And because of that difference in perceived audience you can start to see how major organizations work, and it’s not how people think they work – it’s something different. And if we are to produce a more civilized society, a more just society, it has to be based upon the truth. Because judgements which are not based upon the truth can only lead to outcomes which are themselves false.\(^2\)

So if WikiLeaks is a threat to power in this phase, it is as a force of disruption in the way authority mediates itself. It is an attempted assault upon the control of information as a precondition to political change, not a campaign to achieve a particular policy goal or to promote a political faction or movement.

In some ways, at this stage WikiLeaks appears to have some of the characteristics of ‘rhizomatic’ alternative media, a more protean form of anti-mainstream organization or network that is prepared to deal critically with both state and market, but that operates according to its own imperatives, principles and methods:

The approach to alternative media as rhizomatic also makes it possible to highlight the fluidity and contingency of (community) media organizations, in contrast to the more rigid ways mainstream public and commercial media often
(have to) function. The elusive identity of alternative media means that they can – by their mere existence and functioning – question and destabilize the rigidities and certainties of public and commercial media organizations. At the same time, their elusiveness makes alternative media hard to control and to encapsulate in legislation, thus guaranteeing their independence.¹⁰

By its very nature, a 'rhizomatic' form of alternative media is not necessarily static. WikiLeaks embraces the uncertainty principle. By adopting different aspects of various media/political organizations, WikiLeaks appears in this phase to have created a hybridized, multi-faceted media entity combining elements of the following models:

- hacktivist network
- transparency organization
- political sect
- stateless group
- uncensorable outlet.

What was WikiLeaks an alternative to? At this point it's important to remind ourselves that mainstream media is also in flux. The definition of differences between mainstream and alternative were becoming blurred. Indeed, the definition of journalism itself was also being challenged. WikiLeaks is very much part of this process.

1.3 THE CHALLENGE OF WIKILEAKS TO MAINSTREAM MEDIA JOURNALISM

The same new digital communications environment that provided the conditions for WikiLeaks also created a period of unprecedented transformation for mainstream news media.

The Internet, digitization and related social and economic changes are turning old models of media production, dissemination and consumption upside-down.¹¹ This is a period of rapid and radical transition for journalism. It is moving from a closed to an open system. Deadlines are dissolving as news is personalized by consumers into an on-demand service. Where the infrastructure and resources allow, information is now endlessly available, interactive, connected and editable. The Internet now networks information that was previously compartmentalized into government, business, personal and public data and retained by those people or groups. There is no longer any need to wait for the news media to gather, filter and package information. Citizens and organizations can transmit and receive it themselves.

This means that the flow of information is now increasingly occurring outside of traditional mainstream news media. Previously, the news media were virtually the only public platform for accessing topical facts, comment, analysis and debate. Now much of that discourse has been disintermediated. As WikiLeaks itself has shown, cost barriers to creating an online media platform are so low as to be insignificant. Contrast that with the cost of investing in a printing plant, a TV studio or any kind of traditional professional mass media newsroom. All this means that mainstream journalism is facing two major threats. One is economic; the other is editorial competition. Of course, the two are related and both are relevant to the evolution of WikiLeaks. How journalism deals with those threats will also determine how it handles the deeper shifts in the role of information in politics and society.

Mainstream news media in the West is facing a business crisis as the Internet erodes its sources of revenue. News media elsewhere in the world may be growing sales and audiences as developing countries expand their media markets,
but the old business model will face similar structural challenges there, too. In most developed countries, newspaper sales are declining over the long term, and while TV audiences are not plummeting, advertising is moving into other, cheaper, online platforms. There is still huge value in many of these legacy media organizations, especially as they adapt and move online. They have strong brands, high profile and reputations of affinity and trust with their audiences. They also have editorial experience and resources that add to their physical and legal assets. Some are experimenting with new payment mechanisms that may provide a viable business model. However, free access to online news is making it harder to monetize their web-based operations even where they are able to attract attention and traffic. For example, the Guardian website, guardian.co.uk, is the fifth-most-read newspaper website in the world, with around 30 million unique visits per month. Yet the paper Guardian newspaper is only the ninth most-read paper in the UK. Even combined they are bringing in much less revenue than that generated by 400,000 readers for the dead-tree version in the past.\(^{32}\)

This has led to severe pressure on editorial resources in mainstream media. It is not enough simply to count heads, but attempts to measure the decline in original production do generally indicate increased constraints on the quality of work.\(^{33}\) Of course, digitization brings huge efficiencies and productivity gains. You only have to consider the time-savings brought by mobile phones and Internet research. Then add on much faster editing technologies and the benefits of free ‘user-generated content’. The response of a healthy innovative newsroom should be to make the most of all these new tools and to adopt Jeff Jarvis’ nostrum of ‘cover what you do best and link to the rest’.\(^{34}\) Traditional journalism always spent much of its time recycling copy and duplicating the work of other outlets. In a sense, the World Wide Web has merely exposed the inefficiency of traditional, linear media as a delivery mechanism for information and deliberation. Now every act of journalism must add value. This means seeking more genuinely original and useful or attractive material and/or quicker and better ways to connect people to it. Even then, it is clear that the Golden Age of massive newsrooms funded by pseudo-monopoly advertising revenues is over. Too many commercial media organizations have asset-stripped declining businesses instead of building on new technologies and diversifying into related communications services. So, especially in this transition phase, there was no growth in quality mass mainstream journalism outside of elite media, and arguably a decline – especially in the areas of challenging, controversial, risky political and investigative journalism in mass media outlets.

This economic threat is exacerbated by the editorial challenge of online competitors. New online news sources are emerging that offer information directly to the public for free, anytime they want it. Most important are aggregating sites that can recycle material for nothing. Search itself means that people can access individual bits of information in isolation. Google News and Google Search do not employ many journalists but they are now hugely significant sources for news.\(^{35}\) Social networks also recycle material that is linked to or cut and pasted onto platforms like Twitter or Facebook. It means that any information in the public domain is now instantly disseminated through hyperlinks. A new fact put online immediately loses any exclusivity. The state of information as well as analysis and comment has moved from being scarce to super-abundant.

On top of this there are now a whole range of non-mainstream-media producers of journalism. The so-called blogosphere has now attained such a scale and diversity that the term is almost meaningless. As well as the classic
individual bloggers there are now substantial group blogs that cover every topic that mainstream media ever considered and much more. Virtually every public government department, business and civil society organization now has a website, often with a blog element. Everyone from the US State Department to the British monarchy is now on Twitter and Facebook, often connected to slick websites with video, audio and comment pages. They can now communicate directly with the public in a two-way conversation that can cut out the traditional journalistic intermediary.

This has also created opportunities for new forms of mainstream journalism. Some, like the Huffington Post, are hybrids of the new independent producers and the mainstream media models. So Arianna Huffington's (largely) political website has some paid full-time staff but mainly depends on unpaid writers and the aggregation of other publications’ content. It makes money and has been sold to AOL. Another example is Mumsnet in the UK. This has a tiny paid staff who help edit the parenting website that provides news about products, services and developments in family matters. But its main attraction is provided by a series of hugely popular forums. These are lightly moderated but the content is largely driven by the site members. The website has become such an important forum for its demographic that all British political leaders now court its readers by giving online interviews to Mumsnet’s members in the same way that they appear on mainstream TV chat-shows.

There has been a wholesale shift of Western mainstream mass media to a networked journalism model. Virtually all legacy media organizations have now changed the way they gather and disseminate news to reflect the realities described above. This has been a relatively recent move. When Charlie Beckett described networked journalism in SuperMedia (published 2008) it was still an aspiration or innovation. Public participation in mainstream journalism was widely conceived as a threat that could be countered or ignored – even outlawed. By 2010 when Polis, the media think-tank at the London School of Economics, published a report on the state of networked journalism in the UK, it had become a widespread reality, albeit still seen in many media companies as additional to rather than replacing traditional practice. Globally, we see that the first great phase of adoption and adaption of networked journalism is in full swing and that the trends indicate that its effects will deepen and extend. The rapid development of new technological platforms such as Internet-enabled mobile phones and tablet devices with greater interactivity and personalization, combined with the development of more social networking platforms, means that the networked nature of news production can only increase.

At one level, networked journalism is a practical matter of how journalists acquire information. It means gathering user-generated content directly from the public or from other online sources. This is why TV news bulletins now routinely include 'amateur' footage. It is why witnesses on Twitter or Facebook are regularly quoted in news stories. Imagery is now sourced by networked journalists from the vast amounts of pictures uploaded by the public to Flickr, Twitpic or yfrog. But it can go beyond this, for example, to harvesting the wisdom in the crowds. Journalists can appeal for information or for expertise or simply survey what the public thinks about an issue or event. The public is also much more intimately part of the conversation around an event. Instead of lofty columnists handing down opinions, there is a lively and often rude exchange of views through online comment and forums. This reaches its formal apogee in the 'live blog' where a journalist or news team covers a single event or issue with a continuous, multi-dimensional
online web-page story. As it updates it links and recycles other sources – video clips, Tweets, agency information, official statements, reader emails and anything else that can add detail, context or drama to the narrative. It is the journalist as a facilitator of an information flow rather than the main witness or author of a final version of reality. Within five years it has moved from a novelty seen fit only for sports events and culture blogs to a staple of news coverage for the newspapers and broadcasters, like the Guardian, the BBC and beyond. National Public Radio’s Andy Carvin even does it as a Twitter feed.

We shall see in chapter 2 how this increased ‘networkedness’ creates ethical and editorial issues for journalism as ideas of objectivity and transparency are strained to breaking point – especially when it means connecting to journalistic organizations with different ideologies or cultures. But it was into this already turbulent reshaping of journalism that WikiLeaks emerged.

One of the first such cases was that of oil giant Trafalgar. In 2009, reporters for the Guardian newspaper and the flagship BBC current affairs programme Newsnight obtained a damning report on a 2006 incident centred around the dumping of toxic waste off the Ivory Coast. Alongside an MP, Paul Farrelly, the teams attempted to publish their stories despite Trafalgar’s best attempts to obtain a legal injunction barring them from doing so.

As part of such efforts, Farrelly put down a Parliamentary Question relating to the report. The proceedings of the UK’s parliament are regarded as protected speech in the UK. MPs have the unqualified privilege to say anything in parliament. Journalists have qualified privilege to report what MPs say. However, in this instance, a judge ruled against lifting the injunction and the reporting ban remained. Furthermore, the reporters were banned from revealing Trafalgar had obtained such an order. The result was one of the earliest revelations of the incendiary effects when social and mainstream media mix.

A delicately worded and nigh-on incomprehensible article, neither naming the company involved nor publishing documents, appeared on the front page of the Guardian on 12 October 2009, under the byline of the newspaper’s experienced investigations editor David Leigh. Within minutes, thousands of Twitter users in the UK and beyond had deciphered the article using information available elsewhere on the Internet and named Trafalgar.

Someone, too, had involved WikiLeaks. It is not clear whether it was an activist inspired by previous reporting, another associate or whistle-blower, or even – according to some theories – one of the reporters themselves. The full, injunction report appeared on WikiLeaks, and was linked to by thousands of users, breaking the court order. Within hours, the High Court reversed its stance, and the full story could finally be told by the UK media. The story may not have been WikiLeaks’ through-and-through like so many later revelations, but the incident brought to light how WikiLeaks and the wider networks it inhabits are often at their strongest where conventional journalists are weak.

The Trafalgar episode characterizes exactly how the Internet is challenging the role of mainstream media in the mediation of power. The case showed that the balance between information privacy or property and the public interest was being shifted by the affordances of the new technologies. The practical limits on journalism were being expanded exponentially. Along with that, as we shall see in chapter 3, the way that traditional mass media framed narratives and the issues that they chose to put on the agenda were also being questioned.
1.4 THE CHALLENGE OF WIKILEAKS TO POWER

WikiLeaks was always conceived as a disruptive political project. As we have seen, Julian Assange was explicit in his desire to attack the networks of information secrecy that sustained the networks of power. It is worth looking at length at this extract from Assange’s 2006 essay. This is how he describes the structure of power as the communicative relationship between ‘conspirators’:

First take some nails (‘conspirators’) and hammer them into a board at random. Then take twine (‘communication’) and loop it from nail to nail without breaking. Call the twine connecting two nails a link. Unbroken twine means it is possible to travel from any nail to any other nail via twine and intermediary nails. Mathematicians say that this type of graph is connected.

Information flows from conspirator to conspirator. Not every conspirator trusts or knows every other conspirator even though all are connected. Some are on the fringe of the conspiracy, others are central and communicate with many conspirators and others still may know only two conspirators but be a bridge between important sections or groupings of the conspiracy.

To challenge power you must intervene in this ‘conspiracy’: ‘We can deceive or blind a conspiracy by distorting or restricting the information available to it. We can reduce total conspiratorial power via unstructured attacks on links or through throttling and separating. A conspiracy sufficiently engaged in this manner is no longer able to comprehend its environment and plan robust action.’

With this striking metaphor Assange is sketching out a theory of how WikiLeaks can become a ‘Network Exploit’, an intervention in a system that takes advantage of its structure and even strengths to resist its power. What better way to make manifest the conspiracy than by literally making it visible? WikiLeaks’ single most famous leak in this early phase did exactly that. On 5 April 2010, the site released a heavily edited 17-minute video from the cockpit of a US army Apache helicopter in Iraq.

The edited film opened with a graphicized quote from George Orwell: ‘Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give the appearance of solidity to pure wind.’

The footage is a compelling narrative of a military operation that gives the viewer the American combatants’ perspective. It contains shocking scenes. A group of armed Iraqis, plus two Reuters employees speaking with them, are shot and killed – though at the time the pilots are unaware that any of them are journalists. An Iraqi father taking his children to school stops to assist one of the wounded journalists in the aftermath. He too is shot and killed. His children, who remained in the heavily damaged car, were wounded but survived. WikiLeaks journalist Kristinn Hrafnsson, who travelled to Iraq with cameraman Ingi Ingasson to meet survivors featured in the footage, says it was for that death of an innocent civilian that the video was named ‘Collateral Murder’ – not for the deaths of the journalists. Perhaps most shocking of all was the callous attitude shown by the crew of the Apache helicopter. ‘Oh yeah, look at those dead bastards’, one is heard to say to his co-pilot.

WikiLeaks had worked for weeks in Iceland to edit and release the video. Despite promoting the shortened, heavily edited version of the video, WikiLeaks stayed true to its principles of releasing source material, and also issued the full, unedited, 39-minute-long video. This also featured the
same helicopter, call sign 'Crazyhorse one-eight', in another incident, firing a Hellfire missile into a building, despite a bystander walking past at the moment of launch.

The decision to editorialize was a controversial one. The short version of the footage omitted a scene showing one of the men shot had apparently been carrying an RPG (rocket-propelled grenade). Assange’s statement in interviews that the edited version was produced to create ‘maximum political impact’ were used as evidence of editorializing. Even the name ‘Collateral Murder’ was questioned, given that some of those killed seemed to be members of the armed struggle against the American occupation.

Assange felt that the video achieved precisely its objective of challenging the ability of the powerful to dictate a ‘false’ narrative:

This video shows what modern warfare has become, and, I think, after seeing it, whenever people hear about a certain number of casualties that resulted during fighting with close air support, they will understand what is going on . . . The video also makes clear that civilians are listed as insurgents automatically, unless they are children, and that bystanders who are killed are not even mentioned.

The video was also the first to prompt a reaction to WikiLeaks from senior figures within the American administration. Defense Secretary Robert Gates condemned the video for failing to show the hostile context in which US soldiers were operating: ‘They’re in a combat situation. The video doesn’t show the broader picture of the firing that was going on at American troops. It’s obviously a hard thing to see. It’s painful to see, especially when you learn after the fact what was going on. But these people were operating in split second situations.’

The wider response of the US government was muted. Asked about the footage in his 7 April 2010 briefing, White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs neglected to condemn the leak of the footage, instead agreeing it was ‘very graphic in nature and extremely tragic’ and stressing the tough climate in which the US army was operating.

In a remark which in hindsight was laced with irony, Defense Secretary Robert Gates complained the Collateral Murder video was like looking at the conflict ‘through a soda straw’ – a picture far too narrow to draw out meaningful conclusions, and easily subject to distortion. What WikiLeaks did next, if anything, granted Gates his wish – and provoked a far more aggressive response from the Obama administration.

Collateral Murder was more than just the first of the leaks believed to have been received from Bradley Manning. Unlike the larger document dumps – which WikiLeaks possessed by the time of the video’s publication – it was small enough for WikiLeaks to edit and produce with its own resources. Even more than the subsequent releases, the video heralded WikiLeaks’ shift from a wiki-style home for documents to a more complex hybrid.

WikiLeaks had to use almost all of its resources to do so, however. Assange, some of his techs, and leading supporters such as Icelandic MP Birgitta Jonsdottir all gathered together and worked day after day on the release – in addition to the trip to Iraq by two WikiLeaks. This stalled all other everyday operations by the site. This was the beginning of tensions between Julian and other supporters which would reach a head in the following months. WikiLeaks’ internal and external transformations were accelerating apace.

Also present in what was informally dubbed the ‘bunker’ for several days, was journalist Raffi Khatchadourian, whose New Yorker profile includes a succinct summary of where
Julian Assange's philosophy for the site had shifted to by this point:

I want to set up a new standard: 'scientific journalism'. If you publish a paper on DNA, you are required, by all the good biological journals, to submit the data that has informed your research – the idea being that people will replicate it, check it, verify it. So this is something that needs to be done for journalism as well. There is an immediate power imbalance, in that readers are unable to verify what they are being told, and that leads to abuse.65

In effect, because WikiLeaks publishes its source material, Assange believes that it is free to offer its analysis, no matter how speculative. Indeed, WikiLeaks had submitted its own analysis and interpretations of its material since the start. Shifting to editing the material, or selecting its key features, was a minor transition from this point. What distinguished – and still distinguishes – WikiLeaks from the mainstream is its insistence on publishing full source material alongside its interpretation of the facts.

At this point we can see that WikiLeaks is pushing at the boundaries of the typology of an alternative media organization. It is certainly a threat to the status quo – both media and political. That is why it began to come under sustained attack from both press and politicians. In response to that, it began pursuing the Iceland Media Initiative with Icelandic MP Birgitta Jonsdottir. This was an attempt to turn Iceland into a free media haven, a constitutionally guarded space where organizations like WikiLeaks would be safe from legal assault.66 At this point WikiLeaks was certainly conforming to the idea of independent watchdog media, holding authority to account by giving evidence for abuses of power. For all its distortions and rhetorical flourishes, the Collateral Murder project did give strong evidence that the American military was not being entirely honest in its disclosures about civilian deaths. By continuing to protect its sources WikiLeaks was exposing the limits of the authorities' powers (or at least those in democratic states) to prevent exposure. The fact that it had a different risk calculation from conventional media meant that it was much more relaxed about putting this kind of material into the public domain. As we shall see in chapter 2, that was not without ethical problems. But this was not enough. What seemed to surprise WikiLeaks was the relative lack of interest from the wider media and general public in this exposé of one graphic incident. To Assange and his team it seemed logical to try to find bigger stories and a way of disseminating them that would have the kind of impact on those in power that was the ultimate objective of WikiLeaks itself.

* See the Epilogue for a summary of the latest and highly significant developments on these issues at the end of August 2011 when WikiLeaks released all the Embassy cables in full.