By Geert Lovink and Patrice Riemens

These 0.
“What do I think of Wikileaks? I think it would be a good idea!” (after Mahatma Gandhi’s famous quip on ‘Western Civilisation’)

These 1.
Disclosures and leaks have been of all times, but never before has a non state- or non- corporate affiliated group done this at the scale Wikileaks managed to with the ‘Afghan War Logs’. But nonetheless we believe that this is more something of a quantitative leap than of a qualitative one. In a certain sense, these ‘colossal’ Wikileaks disclosures can simply be explained as a consequence of the dramatic spread of IT usage, together with a dramatic drop in its costs, including those for the storage of millions of documents. Another contributing factor is the fact that safekeeping state and corporate secrets – never mind private ones – has become rather difficult in an age of instant reproducibility and dissemination. Wikileaks here becomes symbolic for a transformation in the ‘information society’ at large, and holds up a mirror of future things to come. So while one can look at Wikileaks as a (political) project, and criticize it for its modus operandi, or for other reasons, it can also be seen as a ‘pilot’ phase in an evolution towards a far more generalized culture of anarchic exposure, beyond the traditional politics of openness and transparency.

These 2.
For better or for worse, Wikileaks has skyrocketed itself into the realm of high-level international politics. Out of the blue, Wikileaks has briefly become a full-blown player both on the world scene, as well as in the national sphere of some countries. By virtue of its disclosures, Wikileaks, small as it is, appears to carry the same weight as government or big corporations – in the domain of information gathering and publicizing at least. But at same time it is unclear whether this is a permanent feature or a hype-induced temporary phenomenon – Wikileaks appears to believe the former, but only time will tell. Nonetheless Wikileaks, by word of its best known representative Julian Assange, think that, as a puny non-state and non-corporate actor, it is boxing in the same weight-class as the Pentagon – and starts to behave accordingly. One could call this the ‘Talibanization’ stage of postmodern – “Flat World” – theory where scales, times, and places have been declared largely irrelevant. What counts is the celebrity momentum and the amount of media attention. Wikileaks manages to

capture that attention by way of spectacular information hacks where other parties, especially civil society groups and human rights organizations, are desperately struggling to get their message across. Wikileaks genially puts to use the 'escape velocity' of IT – using IT to leave IT behind and irrupt into the realm of real-world politics.

These 3.
In the ongoing saga termed "The Decline of the US Empire", Wikileaks enters the stage as the slayer of a soft target. It would be difficult to imagine it doing quite the same to the Russian or Chinese government, or even to that of Singapore – not to speak of their … err … 'corporate' affiliates. Here distinct, and huge, cultural and linguistic barriers are at work, not to speak of purely power-related ones, that would need to be surmounted. Also vastly different constituencies obtain there, even if we speak about the more limited (and allegedly more globally shared) cultures and agendas of hackers, info-activists and investigative journalists. In that sense Wikileaks in its present manifestation remains a typically 'Western' product and cannot claim to be a truly universal or global undertaking.

These 4.
One of the main difficulty with explaining Wikileaks arises from the fact it is unclear – and also unclear to the Wikileaks people themselves – whether it sees itself and operates as a content provider or as a simple carrier of leaked data (whichever one, as predicated by context and circumstances, is the impression). This, by the way, has been a common problem ever since media went massively online and publishing and communications became a service rather than a product. Julian Assenge cringes every time he is portrayed as the editor-in-chief of Wikileaks, yet on the other hand, Wikileaks says it edits material before publication and claims it checks documents for authenticity with the help of hundreds of volunteer analysts. This kind of content vs. carrier debates have been going on for a number of decades amongst media activists with no clear outcome. Therefore, instead of trying to resolve this inconsistency, it might be better to look for fresh approaches and develop new, critical, concepts for what has become a hybrid publishing practice involving actors far beyond the traditional domain of professional news media.

These 5.
The steady decline of investigative journalism due to diminishing support and funding is an undeniable fact. The ever-ongoing acceleration and over-

crowding in the so-called attention economy makes that there is no longer enough room for complicated stories. The corporate owners of mass circulation media are also less and less inclined to see the working of the neo-liberal globalized economy and its politics detailled and discussed at length. The shift of information towards infotainment demanded by the public and media-owners has unfortunately also been embraced as a working style by journalists themselves making it difficult to publish complex stories. Wikileaks erupts in this state of affairs as an outsider within the steamy ambiance of 'citizen journalism' and DIY news reporting in the blogosphere. What Wikileaks anticipates, but so far has not been able to organize, is the 'crowd sourcing' of the actual interpretation of its leaked documents.

Traditional investigative journalism consisted of three phases: unearthing facts, cross-checking these and backgrounding them into an understandable discourse. Wikileaks does the first, claims to do the second, but leaves the issue of the third completely blank. This is symptomatic of a particular brand of the open access ideology, whereby the economy of content production itself is externalized to unknown entities 'out there'. The crisis in investigative journalism is neither understood nor recognized. How the productive entities are supposed to sustain themselves is left in the dark. It is simply presumed that the analysis and interpretation will be taken up by the traditional news media but this is not happening automatically. The saga of the Afghan War Logs demonstrates that Wikileaks has to approach and negotiate with well-established traditional media to secure sufficient credibility. But at the same time these also prove unable to fully process the material.

These 6.
Wikileaks is a typical SPO (Single Person Organization). This means that initiative-taking, decision making, and the execution process is largely centralized in the hands of one single person. Much like small and medium-size businesses the founder cannot be voted out and unlike many collectives leadership is not rotating. This is not an uncommon feature within organizations, indifferent whether they operate in the realm of politics, culture or the 'civil society' sector. SPOs are recognizable, exciting, inspiring, and easy to feature in the media. Their sustainability, however is largely dependent on the actions of their charismatic leader, and their functioning is difficult to reconcile with democratic values. This is also why they are difficult to replicate and do not scale up easily. Sovereign hacker Julian Assange is the identifying figurehead of Wikileaks, whose notoriety

and reputation very much merges with his own, blurring the distinction between what it does and stands for and Assange's (rather agitated) private life and (somewhat unpolished) political opinions.

These 7.
Wikileaks is also an organization deeply shaped by 1980s hacker culture combined with the political values of techno-libertarianism which emerged in the 1990s. The fact that Wikileaks has been founded, and is still to a large extent run by hard core geeks, forms an essential frame of reference to understand its values and moves. This, unfortunately, comes together with a good dose of the somewhat less savory aspects of hacker culture. Not that idealism, the desire to contribute to making the world a better place, could be denied to Wikileaks, quite on the contrary. But this idealism is paired with a preference for conspiracies, an elitist attitude and a cult of secrecy (never mind condescending manners) which is not conducive to collaboration with like minded people and groups – reduced to the position of simple consumers of Wikileaks outcomes.

These 8.
Lack of commonality with congenial 'another world is possible' movements forces Wikileaks to seek public attention by way of increasingly spectacular – and risky – disclosures, while gathering a constituency of often wildly enthusiastic, but totally passive supporters. Following the nature and quantity of Wikileaks exposures from its inception up to the present day is eerily reminiscent of watching a firework display, and that includes a 'grand finale' in the form of the doomsday-machine pitched, waiting-to-be-unleashed, 'Insurance' document. This raises serious doubts about the long-term sustainability of Wikileaks itself, but possibly also, that of the Wikileaks model. Wikileaks operates on a ridiculously small size (probably no more than a dozen of people form the core of its operation). While the extent and savviness of Wikileaks' tech support is proved by its very existence, Wikileaks' claim to several hundreds, or even more, volunteer analysts and experts is unverifiable, and to be frank, barely credible. This is clearly Wikileaks Achilles' heel, not only from a risks and/or sustainability standpoint, but politically as well – which is what matters to us here.

These 9.
Wikileaks displays a stunning lack of transparancy in its internal organization. Its excuse that "Wikileaks needs to be completely opaque in order to force others to be totally transparent." amounts to little more than

Mad Magazine's famous Spy vs Spy cartoons. You win from the opposition but in a way that makes you undistinguishable from it. And claiming the moral high ground afterwards is not really helpful – Tony Blair too excelled in that exercise. As Wikileaks is neither a political collective nor an NGO in the legal sense, and not a company or part of social movement for that matter, we need first of all discuss what type of organization it is that we deal with. Is it a virtual project? After all, it does exist as a hosted website with a domain name, which is the bottom line. But does it have a goal beyond the personal ambition of its founder(s)? Is Wikileaks reproducible and will we see the rise of national or local chapters that keep the name Wikileaks? And according to which playing rules will they operate? Or should we rather see it as a concept that travels from context to context and that, like a meme, transforms itself in time and space?

Maybe Wikileaks will organize itself around an own version of the IETF's slogan 'rough consensus and running code'? Projects like Wikipedia and Indymedia have both resolved this issue in their own ways, but not without crises, forks and disruptive conflicts. A critique like the one voiced here does not aim to force Wikileaks into a traditional format but on the contrary to explore whether Wikileaks (and its future clones, associates, avatars and assorted family members) could stand model for new forms of organizations and collaborations. Elsewhere the term 'organized network' has been coined as a possible term for this formats. In the past there was talked of 'tactical media'. Others have used the generic term 'internet activism'. Perhaps Wikileaks has other ideas in what direction it wants to take this organizational debate. But where? It is of course up to Wikileaks to decide for itself but up to now we have seen very little by way of an answer, leaving others, like the Wall Street Journal, to raise questions, e.g., about Wikileaks' financial bona fides.

These 10.
We do not think that taking a stand in favor or against Wikileaks is what matters most. Wikileaks is there, and there to stay till it either scuttles itself or is destroyed by the forces opposing its operation. Our point is rather to (try to) pragmatically assess and ascertain what Wikileaks can, could – and maybe even, who knows, should – do, and help formulate how 'we' could relate to and interact with Wikileaks. Despite all its drawbacks, and against all odds, Wikileaks has rendered a sterling service to the cause of transparency, democracy and openness. We might wish it to be different, but, as the French would say, if something like it did not exist, it would have

to be invented. The ‘quantitative turn’ of information overload is a fact of present life. One can only expect the glut of disclosable information to grow further – and exponentially so. To organize and interpret this Himalaya of data is a collective challenge that is out there, whether we give it the name ‘Wikileaks’ or not.

Amsterdam, late August 2010