A tale of two worlds

Apocalypse, 4Chan, WikiLeaks and the silent protocol wars

Nicolás Mendoza

There is something eerie about the WikiLeaks logo. It works as a sort of graphic manifesto, an image of dense political content stating a notion of ample consequences. A cosmic sandglass encloses a duplicated globe seen from an angle that puts Iraqi territory at the centre. Inside this device the upper and darker planet is exchanged, drip by drip, for a new one. The power of the image lies in the sense of inexorability it conveys, alluding to earthly absolutes like the flow of time and the force of gravity. The WikiLeaks symbol can be read as a bullish threat that grants the upper world no room for hope. The logo narrates a gradual apocalypse, and by articulating this process of transformation through the image of the leak, WikiLeaks defines itself as the critical agent in the becoming of a new world.

What has become manifest since late November 2010, with the release of what is now known as 'The US Embassy Cables', is that the narrative implicit in the WikiLeaks logo, that of a world disjunct, not only fits the WikiLeaks saga but describes a greater struggle of global power, held diffusely by transnational corporations and enforced by governments around the world. This power is under attack by a relatively new actor that can be called, for now, the autonomous network.

The conditions that allow the network to challenge the power of governments and corporations can be traced to the origin of the Internet and the Cold War zeitgeist that made the network we know possible. It was only because Cold War strategists had to narrate to themselves the unfolding of what was known as the 'worst-case scenario' (the moment after a thermonuclear apocalypse was under way) that a computer network with the characteristics of the Internet was implemented. The idea of the apocalypse was so extraordinary that it allowed for the radical thinking that resulted in the TCP/IP computer protocol suite, a resilient network protocol that makes the end user of the network its primary agent. The design philosophy of the Internet protocols represents a clean break from the epistemes and continuums that had historically informed the evolution of Western power, as traced by Foucault and Deleuze from sovereign societies to disciplinary societies to societies of control.

The main goal of the early Internet was to provide a survivor with a versatile tool that could make him an empowered agent in an utterly hostile post-apocalyptic world. The TCP/IP protocol suite structures the network around three exceptional characteristics: (1) it essentially bypasses the need for central structures, establishing a network based on the principle of end-to-end (or peer-to-peer) communication; (2) it provides maximum resilience of communication in a hostile environment through the model of distribution; and (3) it is neutral to the information being distributed. These characteristics at the protocol level defined the network as, literally, *out of control*.

'The early Internet was so accidental, it also was free and open in this sense [as a commons]',[1] Steve Wozniak says. To *produce* a commons is indeed an accident for Empire. Dismissed as a never-meant-for-the-masses autonomous zone, by and for the military and academia, it was allowed to evolve out of control. But this accident that happened because of daydreaming an extreme future never stopped happening. It evolved. At some point it gained an accessible graphic interface, and spilled all over the globe. By then it was too late to disarm what is now the increasingly contentious coexistence of two worlds, as the WikiLeaks logo registers. One world is a pre-apocalyptic capitalistic society of individualism, profit and control; the other a post-apocalyptic community of self-regulating collaborative survivors. The conflict arises from an essential paradox: because the web exists, both worlds need it in order to prevail over the other.

The 'cyber war' announced so spectacularly (in the Debordian sense) in the days following WikiLeaks' US Embassy Cables release is not really about the DDoS, 'denial of service' attacks that barely obstructed access to the MasterCard website for a few hours. If anything, the ephemerality of the disturbance leaves the sensation that Anonymous, the group that launched it, is anything but a structural threat. What journalists around the world have failed to narrate is the tale of a network that increasingly challenges, bypasses and outcompetes the global corporate-government complex.[2] A struggle about the obsolescence of the very idea of the nation-state, and an almost unanimous coalition of governments, led by the USA, fighting furiously to regain control by exerting legal, financial, symbolic and, perhaps most concerning, technical violence on their adversary. The reasons for this failure of journalism are structural. As Bourdieu noted, journalism is a *weakly* autonomous field. In Foucault's terms, its governmentality sets meaningful structural criticism beyond what is thinkable. The legacy of Julian Assange, founder of WikiLeaks, is in this sense (so far) to replace the journalistic structures that *curated* the critical figure of the whistleblower with the autonomous network, thus redefining not journalism but what journalism perceives as newsworthy reality.

Rogue episteme

Approaching the history of the Internet through the Cold War zeitgeist helps us see a sort of Schumpeterian quality in the network. Essentially a destructive entity that, like the Terminator, comes from the future (the imagined end of civilization), it is loose in an arcane environment (the present) that fights back. Perhaps the fact that Anonymous defines itself using tone and vocabulary that closely resemble the description of the Terminator in Cameron's 1983 film is not a coincidence but a sign of the epistemic coincidence of two post-apocalyptic entities.

Your feelings mean nothing to us. … We have no culture, we have no laws, written or otherwise. … We do not sleep, we do not eat and we do not feel remorse. We will tear you apart from outside and in, we have all the time in the world. (extract from entry on Anonymous in the *Encyclopedia Dramatica)*

Listen. Understand. That Terminator is out there. It can't be reasoned with, it can't be bargained with … it doesn't feel pity of remorse or fear … and it absolutely will not stop. Ever. Until you are dead. (James Cameron, director, *The Terminator*)

Network-native structures and their resulting communities are fuelled by hybrid motivations often alien to the material struggles seen by Marxism to lie behind the motion of history. In his book *Hacking Capitalism* Johan Söderberg proposes the notion of 'play struggle' as

opposed to 'class struggle' as the force that drives hackers as well as diverse realms of the network society.

> Similar to labour in that it is a productive engagement with the world, play differs in that it is freely chosen and marked by a high degree of self-determination among the players. *At its heart, the politics of play struggle consist in the distance it places between doing and the wage relation*. Play is a showcase of how labour self-organizes its constituent power outside the confines of market exchanges.[3]

Söderberg proposes that play is labour within an exchange system external to the autocratic determinations of materialism. With the notion of 'play struggle' we can understand Anonymous and its instant response in the wake of the WikiLeaks attack. Anonymous emerged spontaneously from 4Chan.org, which has a curious set of features: (a) anonymity, (b) 'lack of memory' (as opposed to 'cloud computing', no record is kept in its servers but rather in the collective memory sedimented in the minds and hard drives of its users), (c) emphasis on visual conversation (through the intervention of images), and (d) a non-censorship policy that is only afraid of the police (as opposed to the market). Therefore, Play: these characteristics are all instrumental to placing in 4Chan an insurmountable distance '*between doing and the wage relation*'. Its unique policy, its origin, ownership and ethos, and its substantial and highly engaged community make 4Chan the Internet's most prolific semiotic laboratory.

It is telling that the software used to perform the denial of service attacks on MasterCard, PayPal and Amazon is a relatively simple program called LOIC, for Low Orbit Ion Cannon, a fictional weapon in the Command & Conquer series of video games.[4] Play drives Anonymous. It is the glue that ultimately holds it together, and the threat of state/corporate control triggers its reaction. Serious play is at the core of the rogue episteme. When play follows only its own logic it necessarily escapes commodification. To play seriously is often *counterplay*,[5] to set the system itself as the locus of play (even 4Chan has been victim, because it is funny, of its own DDoS attacks). Remix of pop culture imagery in 4Chan can be understood as a case of inverted absorption. Instead of commodification by the mainstream, it is 4Chan which exploits the mainstream deconstructing its text, inverting and problematizing its original intentions in a way that exceeds fan culture. 4Chan.org is a primary node in the fundamental clash of the centre and the indigestible fringe of contemporary digital culture.

Anonymous is one of countless iterations of a vibrant digital fringe, an unprecedented source of cultural production situated outside of the regular conducts: those regulated by governments and exploited by corporations in order to standardize identity and stimulate consumption. What is unprecedented is not only the method but also the subject of production. The method and subject are one: the de-localized collaborating community. Anonymous is an open provocation from the rogue episteme of the collaborating community. Not only incomprehensible to the corporate episteme, more importantly it is repressed, excluded and policed; handbook procedure on how to deal with cultural production that cannot be absorbed into corporate imagery.

For the average individual, visiting 4Chan, and particularly its main forum called simply '/b/', can be either repulsive or disappointing. Its content is distasteful to sensibilities constructed by the twentieth century's mammoths of consumption-driven mass media, and their resulting version of reality. But we cannot fully understand the true state of contemporary culture, and the future of cultural production (that scary euphemism), if we do not understand 4Chan. Yet 4Chan does not feel any need to be easily understood. Its autonomous project requires a stage of disorientation because its method is continuously to produce and evolve a language of its own. After all, how can autonomy be claimed while using the language of the oppressors? How can a new epistemological commons come to be if not by the crafting of an alternative language?
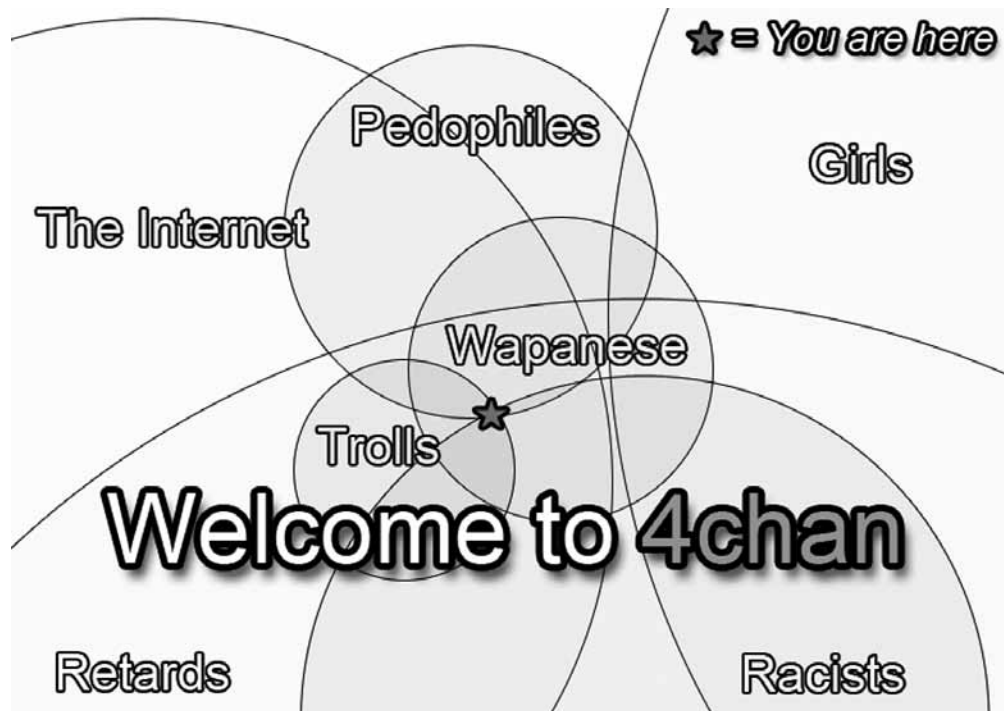
Early impressionist paintings were abhorred as well: they were thought to be an insult to the high art of painting because they were being read through the very categories that were being subverted. The digital fringe assists in solving the problem of disorientation by establishing a parallel knowledge apparatus, analogous to the one that currently dictates reality: knowledge regarding this branching episteme of the anonymous collective is articulated, while still using its own terms in *Encyclopedia Dramatica*, at www.encyclopediadramatica.com. These two sites constitute a robust strategic node in the unwritten project of autonomous Internet aesthetics as a commons, or, as it is often called, 'the hivemind', an entity composed of myriad human and non-human actors that fosters what I've called above the rogue episteme.

Perhaps 4Chan is not exactly what Sean Cubitt had in mind when interrogating digital aesthetics, but it is certainly a model that seems to holds its ground against the 'insidious blandness' of the corporate site:

> Digital aesthetics needs both to come up with something far more interesting than corporate sites, and to act critically to point up their insidious blandness and global ambitions. Subversion of the dominant is inadequate. In its place, it is essential to imagine a work without coherence, without completion and without autonomy. Such a work, however, must also be able to take on the scale of the cyborg culture, a scale beyond the individual, and outside the realm of the hyperindividuated subject. By the same token, aesthetics must move beyond the organic unity of the art object and embrace the social process of making.[6]

Anonymous and 4Chan currently play a strategic and necessary role in the struggle: the construction of an alternative episteme based on the commons of play rather than on consumption and commodities. Yet their political impact in the specific case of the WikiLeaks saga has been blown out of proportion. Mainstream journalism focused on the ultimately symbolic skirmishes starred by Anonymous, hyping the spectacular narrative of a cyberwar fought by an otherized and widely misunderstood cultural movement that cannot really be called 'hacktivist'.

Although the idea of two parallel worlds sets the stage, it is really the over-simplification of a fuzzy, ambiguous and entangled field. Even the idea of the leak itself establishes a relationship, a flow that connects the two worlds.

Beings in a digital nexus

Julian Assange defines himself as a being in nexus: 'I'm an activist, journalist, a software programmer and expert in cryptography, specializing in systems designed to protect the defenders of human rights.'[7] It is a common mistake to think that 4Chan's imagery is contained and endlessly reconfigured exclusively inside the 4Chan node or any of the other peripheral cultural nodes of which 4Chan is merely the paradigm. The vapours of the 4Chan cauldron float freely through the web, through other media, and often into physical reality. As meaning flows towards the mainstream through diverse curatorial platforms, the abnormal is filtrated, sanitized and relegated to the appropriate realms, which are ultimately defined in function to the semiotic needs of the corporate world. Fully mapping or theorizing these flows is beyond this article, but two major points should be noted.

First, this process of flow is also transformative: at the same time as some of the content is discarded (as it is *curated*) by realms that are less daring, more commercial, or more 'family oriented', these very realms find themselves dealing anyway with a new language which is in a gradual process of adoption, and which subtly transforms them. Second, a taxonomy of autonomy is necessary to theorize these secondary realms. While 4Chan is outside of the corporate cultural production, it is at the centre of a hybrid mediascape that features different degrees of epistemic autonomy. These taxonomies encompass the media as a global phenomenon and go all the way to the most corporate environments of mass media, of which mainstream reporting of Anonymous is just another example. The flow and the destiny of fringe cultural inventions are determined by vectors inherent to the media, and these vectors need to be understood through a taxonomy that looks closely at their structural elements and the role they play in enabling or constraining autonomy.

Cubitt has noted the ideological construct hiding in the catchphrase 'cloud computing', a term that obscures the fact that the 'cloud' is really made of thousands of dense cargo containers filled with computing equipment that consumes more energy than the airline industry. Cyberspace, outside the mind of the user, does not exist. Therefore, the operation is to consider and analyse cyberspace as a semiotic construct. Perhaps the more meaningful notion here is the plasticity of the semiotic ethos of cyberspace: how its inhabitants adopt the social norm of each specific virtual space while at the same time exploring its boundaries. If practices of content creation are substantially different from 4Chan to Facebook, it is not, as one tends to imagine, because the individuals are different but because the interface and the overall environment are different, and impose a determined set of values on its members/users. Individuals accordingly adjust their digital selves. All the aspects that result in the actual interface, whether evident or not, that constitute an online collective collaboration (like website origin, ownership, interface, aesthetic, demographics, moderation, business model, hardware, etc.) play an equally significant role in determining the ideas that will inhabit its space as well as the turbulences through which they will evolve.

The notion of an entangled media, where the autonomous and the corporate, the fringe and the mainstream, the centralized and the distributed seem engaged in a shapeless mesh of cultural production, ceases to be contradictory by understanding the simple reality that they are all the cultural objects of the same individuals. Media channels multiply faster than demographic segments and interest orientations. The real scenario is that the Anonymous 'hacktivist' is also a nice Facebook user, has a few favourite television shows, participates frequently on websites like Slashdot, Digg or Reddit, votes, and so on. All this is done while plastically adjusting his (it is usually a 'he') very cultural identity according to the context. Existing in a multidimensional media nexus, he does (we all do) a sort of hyperspatial jumping to parallel existences, constantly choosing to participate in different communities and different realms.

Coup de net

'There is no remote corner of the Internet not dependent on protocols', Laura DeNardis insists.[8] What DeNardis stresses is the ultimate preponderance of the technical over the social protocol. Lessig inaugurated this line of thinking when he famously stated '*Code is Law*'. But protocol runs deeper than software: if code is law then protocol is the constitution. This is why, as long as attention is diverted towards anything spectacular (like tactical and superficial DDoS attacks), governments can start the demolition of the protocols that grant the possibility of autonomy to the network. In reaction to the release of the US Embassy Cables, the UN called for the creation of a group that would end the current multi-stakeholder nature of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) to give the last word on Internet control to the governments of the world. The almost illegible resolution calls for the UN

> to convene open and inclusive consultations involving all Member States and all other stake-holders with a view to assisting the process towards enhanced cooperation *in order to enable Governments* on an equal footing *to carry out their roles and responsibilities in respect of international public policy issues pertaining to the Internet* but not of the day-to-day technical and operational matters that do not impact upon those issues.[9]

I have emphasized the fragments where the meaning hides: to 'enable Governments to carry out their roles and responsibilities' is of course a nice way to talk about enabling the surveillance, censorship and control that the current protocols still make porous.

After Hillary Clinton stated that the leaks are 'an attack on the international community', the move to gain control of the IGF is unsurprising. It fits the conflict outlined by the WikiLeaks logo. Even if the motion is defeated, which is currently possible, a card has been shown. More moves of this nature, on all possible fronts, will follow until the *coup de net* is complete. The IGF episode matches Douglas Rushkoff's analysis of the ongoing 'net neutrality' debate: 'The moment the "net neutrality" debate began was the moment the net neutrality debate was lost. … [the Internet] will never truly level the playing fields of commerce, politics, and culture. And if it looks like that does stand a chance of happening, the Internet will be adjusted to prevent it.'[10] Protocols are the defining battlefield in the struggle between governments and corporations and the autonomous network. The UN's attempt to take over the IGF is a true act of cyberwar with the strategic warfare plan of hacking the Internet to finally eradicate its aspirations for autonomy.

The notion of protocol describes not only computer protocols, but also social, cultural and political conventions that inform the behaviour of societies. In an ambivalent world that is simultaneously exploring new territories of freedom and being subjected to heightened measures of control, the gradual reclamation of the commons is the crucial operation. Scholars like Michel Bauwens and David Bollier articulate how the Internet fosters processes of decommodification that effectively challenge capitalism. Rather than being the result of a violent class struggle, the end of capitalist hegemony might be the result of a slow Internet-enabled process of migration, a dripping (to abuse once more the WikiLeaks logo) towards societies that organize around commons.

What is interesting is that WikiLeaks, after all, is still up. Someone still hosts it (poetically, a hosting company located in a Cold War era anti-nuclear bunker), and because someone still hosts it, someone still processes their fund-raising, so that allows whistleblowers to keep on leaking information, and so forth. WikiLeaks is an example of how a rogue can still thrive against the will of Empire, supported by an emerging ecology of more autonomous actors. MasterCard, PayPal and Amazon don't need to be shut, just bypassed or outcompeted. As the autonomous ecology evolves, it allows for more complexity. This is where the war stands to be won: in the building of autonomous structures of all sorts (structures that bypass and outcompete existing ones) on top of other new structures until the entire old world is unnecessary.

Notes

1. www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2010/12/steve-wozniak-to-the-fcc-keep-the-internet-free/68294/.
2. Except for John Naughton in the *Guardian*: 'the first really sustained confrontation between the established order and the culture of the internet. There have been skirmishes before, but this is the real thing.' See www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/dec/06/western-democracies-must-live-with-leaks.
3. Johan Söderberg, *Hacking Capitalism: The Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) Movement*, Routledge, London, 2007; emphasis added.
4. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LOIC.
5. Thomas Apperley, *Play and Counterplay from the Situated to the Global*, Institute of Network Cultures, Amsterdam, 2010.
6. Sean Cubitt, 'Digital Aesthetics', *Theory, Culture & Society*, SAGE, London, 1998, p. 142.
7. *Le Monde*'s article on Julian Assange as 'Man of the Year 2010': www.lemonde.fr/documents-wiki-leaks/article/2010/12/24/julian-assange-homme-de-l-annee-pour-le-monde_1456426_1446239.html.
8. Laura DeNardis, *Protocol Politics: The Globalization of Internet Governance*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 2009.
9. See www.isoc.org and www.unpan.org.
10. Douglas Rushkoff, *The Next Net*, 2011, www.shareable.net/blog/the-next-net.

Keyspace

WikiLeaks and the Assange papers

Finn Brunton

Years ago, Julian Assange considered solutions for an unusual problem, the kind of thing cryptographers discuss: how can you make sure a message only becomes readable at a certain time, not before, such that no human frailty or mechanical error interferes with the schedule? He came up with three answers, which display his knack for odd lateral thinking, an unremarked gift that turns up throughout his work. One solution: encrypt the message, and then broadcast the key to the code out into space, to 'distant astral bodies', as he puts it, and wait for it to be bounced back. You can publicize the body, the distance, the coordinates; the satellite dishes of Earth will be oriented at that hour of that day to pick up the bounce and your message will be read. Another solution is quite baroque, with space probes passing a key stream between them, 'using space as the storage medium', before sending decrypts back to Earth. The last is by far the most elegant solution, the most difficult to realize, and in some ways the cruellest. 'If you can predict the future cost/CPU speed then you can create a problem which can't be solved with current technology at a reasonable price. The future isn't predictable enough to do this over the longer term.'[1] You can embed the solution in the future, sealed against every human force but the curve of increasing processing power – the present can only build, and speculate.

What Assange and his colleagues have built, what WikiLeaks embodies, is a kind of photographic negative of this last project: current technology has created a set of profound opportunities – and problems for the existing order – waiting for the arrival of human arrangements capable of making use of them. WikiLeaks is a preliminary