

Hans Ulrich Obrist  
**In Conversation  
with Julian  
Assange, Part I**

01/20

*When I first met Julian Assange – thanks to lawyer and Chair of the Contemporary Art Society Mark Stephens and curator/lawyer Daniel McClean, both of the law firm Finers Stephens Innocent – we discussed ideas for various interview formats. Anton Vidokle and I had discussed the idea to conduct an interview with Assange in which questions would be posed not only by me, but also by a number of artists. This seemed only natural considering the extent to which so many artists have been interested in WikiLeaks, and we then invited seven artists and collectives to ask questions over video for the second part of the interview.*

*My archive now contains over 2000 hours of interviews recorded in many different places, and I am constantly attempting to discover new rules of the game, new approaches to how an interview can work. For an interview with Hans-Peter Feldmann published initially in AnOther Magazine and then in book form, I emailed him one question per day, and each of Feldmann's responses would take the form of an image. For my interview with Louise Bourgeois, I would send a question and she would email back a drawing. When Julian came to my office with Mark and Daniel for our first meeting, we discussed the idea of a different format with questions from artists, and Julian liked this a lot, suggesting that the artists send the questions as short videos so that he could see them. We set the interview for two weeks later at 10 or 11 p.m., as we discovered that we both work late at night. Traveling more than three hours from London on Sunday, February 27, I arrived at Ellingham Hall, the Georgian mansion near the Eastern coast of England that Vaughan Smith offered Julian to use as his address for bail during his UK extradition hearings. In the living room of the picturesque home he described to me as a "golden cage" we drank many cups of coffee and spoke until 3 a.m. about his life, his nomadism, his early beginnings and the invention of WikiLeaks, his time in Egypt, Kenya, Iceland, and other places, his scientific background, and the theoretical underpinnings of WikiLeaks.*

*The interview is divided into two parts – in the first, I was interested in tracing his work back to its beginnings. I was not interested in his court case or private life, but in his public work as the voice of WikiLeaks, and the experiences and philosophical background that informs such a monumentally polemical project. In the second part, which will be published in the following issue of e-flux journal, Assange responds to questions posed to him by artists Goldin+Senneby, Paul Chan, Metahaven (Daniel van der Velden and Vinca Kruk), Martha Rosler, Luis Camnitzer, Superflex, Philippe Parreno, and Ai Weiwei.*

*Many people have contributed to making*

e-flux journal #25 — may 2011 Hans Ulrich Obrist  
In Conversation with Julian Assange, Part I

*this interview possible, and I would like to extend my sincere thanks to Julian Assange, to all the artists for their questions, to Joseph Farrell, Laura Barlow, Orit Gat, Joseph Redwood-Martinez, Mariana Silva, Anton Vidokle, Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Daniel McClean, Julia Peyton-Jones, Mark Stephens, Lorraine Two, and all the artists. This first part of the interview is accompanied by graphics from a pro-active series of works designed by Metahaven, an Amsterdam-based studio for design and research, who have been studying an alternative visual identity for WikiLeaks since June 2010.*

– Hans Ulrich Obrist

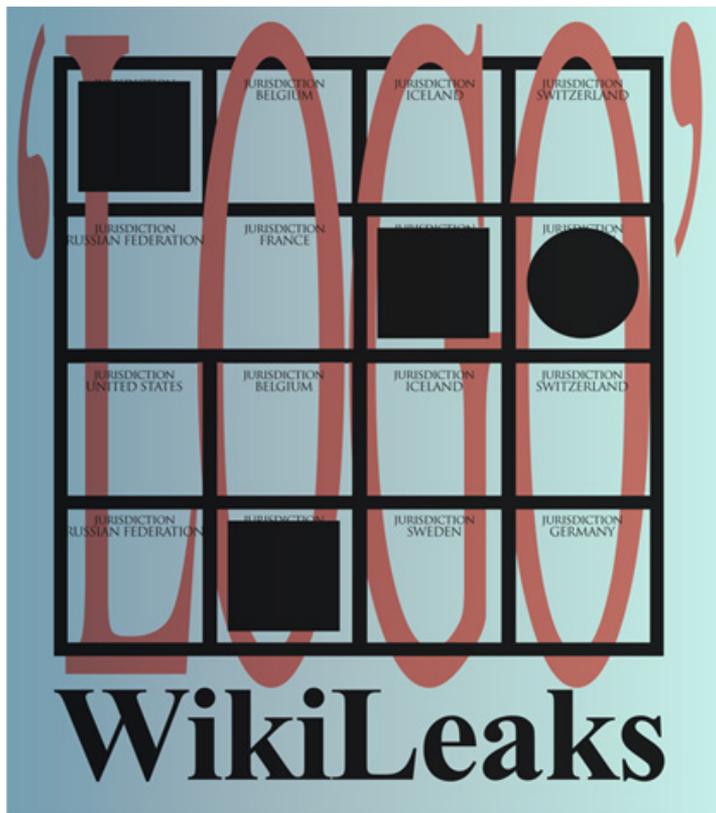
**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** How did it all begin?

**Julian Assange:** I grew up in Australia in the 1970s. My parents were in the theatre, so I lived everywhere – in over fifty different towns, attending thirty-seven different schools. Many of these towns were in rural environments, so I lived like Tom Sawyer – riding horses, exploring caves, fishing, diving, and riding my motorcycle. I lived a classical boyhood in this regard. But there were other events, such as in Adelaide, where my mother was involved in helping to smuggle information out of Maralinga, the British atomic

bomb test site in the outback. She and I and a courier were detained one night by the Australian Federal Police, who told her that it could be said that she was an unfit mother to be keeping such company at 2:00 a.m., and that she had better stay out of politics if she didn't want to hear such things.

I was very curious as a child, always asking why, and always wanting to overcome barriers to knowing, which meant that by the time I was around fifteen I was breaking encryption systems that were used to stop people sharing software, and then, later on, breaking systems that were used to hide information in government computers. Australia was a very provincial place before the internet, and it was a great delight to be able to get out, intellectually, into the wider world, to tunnel through it and understand it. For someone who was young and relatively removed from the rest of the world, to be able to enter the depths of the Pentagon's Eighth Command at the age of seventeen was a liberating experience. But our group, which centered on the underground magazine I founded, was raided by the Federal Police. It was a big operation. But I thought that I needed to share this wealth that I had discovered about the world with people, to give knowledge to people, and so following that I

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Proposal for a Multi-Jurisdictional Logo: Can a visual presence be created, and dismantled, based on domains based in different jurisdictions, switching on and off? Courtesy of Metahaven.

set up the first part of the internet industry in Australia. I spent a number of years bringing the internet to the people through my free speech ISP and then began to look for something with a new intellectual challenge.

**HUO:** So something was missing.

**JA:** Something was missing. This led me to using cryptography to protect human rights, in novel ways, and eventually as a result of what I was doing in mathematics and in physics and political activism, things seemed to come together and show that there was a limit to what I was doing – and what the rest of the world was doing. There was not enough information available in our common intellectual record to explain how the world really works. These were more the feelings and process, but they suggested a bigger question, with a stronger philosophical answer for explaining what is missing. We are missing one of the pillars of history. There are three types of history. Type one is knowledge. Its creation is subsidized, and its maintenance is subsidized by an industry or lobby: things like how to build a pump that pumps water, how to create steel and build other forms of alloys, how to cook, how to remove poisons from food, etc. But because this knowledge is part of everyday industrial

processes, there is an economy that keeps such information around and makes use of it. So the work of preserving it is already done.

**HUO:** It's kind of implicit.

**JA:** There is a system that maintains it. And there's another type of information in our intellectual record. (This is a term I interchange freely with "historical record." When I say "historical record," I don't mean what happened a hundred years ago, but all that we know, including what happened last week.) This second type of information no longer has an economy behind it. It has already found its way into the historical record through a state of affairs which no longer exists. So it's just sitting there. It can be slowly rotting away, slowly vanishing. Books go out of print, and the number of copies available decreases. But it is a slow process, because no one is actively trying to destroy this type of information.

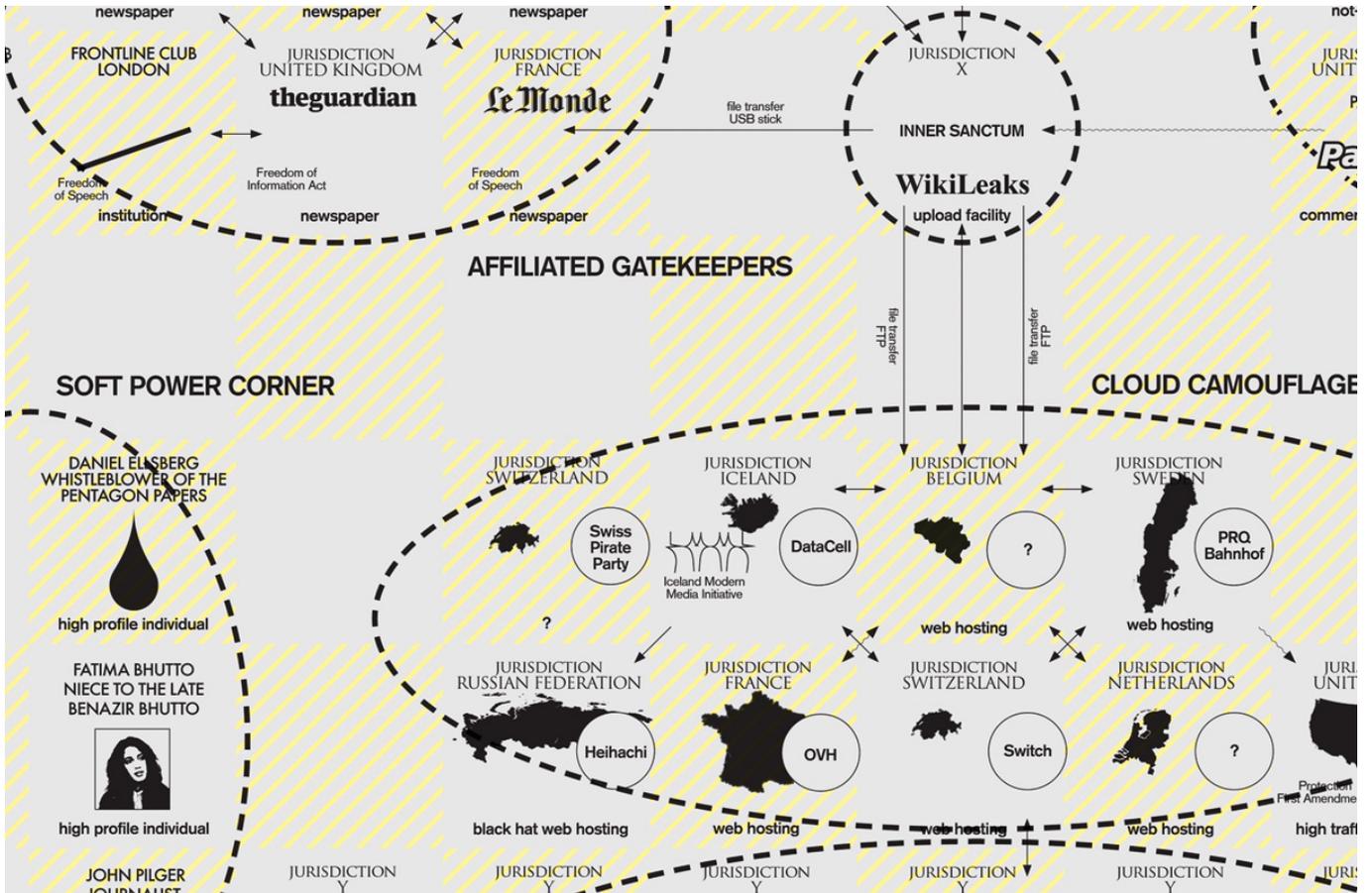
And then there is the type-three information that is the focus of my attention now. This is the information that people are actively working to prevent from entering into the record. Type-three information is suppressed before publication or after publication. If type-three information is spread around, there are active attempts to take it out of circulation. Because these first two

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 **Leaks**

Proposal for an N(G)O Logo: Proposal to self-censor one of WikiLeaks' key slogans, "We Open Governments." And, "Leaks," rather than "Wiki-," is a more appropriate proposed brand name for the future. In this proposal "Wiki-" would be censored away from the name by means of a black bar, so the result is "Leaks." Courtesy of Metahaven.



Proposal for a map of WikiLeaks' hosting and links, based on public sources and news articles (as of December, 2010). The relevance of the hosting model is the simultaneous usage of multiple jurisdictions. Courtesy of Metahaven.

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pillars of our intellectual record either have an economy behind them, or there are no active attempts to destroy them, they do not call to me as loudly. But, this third pillar of information has been denied to all of us throughout the history of the world. So, if you understand that civilized life is built around understanding the world, understanding each other, understanding human institutions and so forth, then our understanding has a great hole in it, which is type-three history. And we want a just and civilized world – and by civilized I don't mean industrialized, but one where people don't do dumb things, where they engage in more intelligent behavior.

**HUO:** Do you mean a more complex behavior?

**JA:** Right, more complex and layered behavior. There are many analogies for what I mean by that, but I'll just give a simple one, which is the water ritual. If you sit down with a friend, and there's a pitcher of water on the table, and there are two glasses, then you pour the other person's water before your own. This is a very simple ritual. But, this is better than the obvious step, which is to pour your own water before the other person's. If we can see a few steps ahead, the water ritual is a more intelligent way to distribute water at a table. That's what I mean by civilization – we gradually build up all these processes and understandings so we don't need to make bad moves with each other or the natural world. So with regard to all this suppressed information, we've never had a proper understanding of it because it has never entered our intellectual record, and if we can find out about how complex human institutions actually behave, then we have a chance to build civilized behavior on top of it. This is why I say that all existing political theories are bankrupt, because you cannot build a meaningful theory without knowledge of the world that you're building the theory about. Until we have an understanding of how the world actually works, no political theory can actually be complete enough to demand a course of action.

**HUO:** So that clearly maps out how you came to where you are today. Since many people now refer to you as one of their heroes, I was wondering who inspired you at the beginning.

**JA:** There have been heroic acts that I have appreciated, or some systems of thought, but I think it's better to say that there are some people I had an intellectual rapport with, such as Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr. That comes when you're doing mathematics. The mathematics of Heisenberg and Bohr is a branch of natural philosophy. They developed a system or epistemology for understanding quantum mechanics, but encoded within this intellectual tradition are methods to think clearly about

cause and effect. When reading mathematics you must take your mind through each intellectual step. In this case, the steps of Heisenberg or Bohr. Because good proofs are very creative, it takes the full energies of your mind to reach through one step to another. Your whole mind must be engaged in a particular state of thought, and you realize that this mental arrangement is the same as the author's at the moment of writing, so the feeling of mental similarity and rapport becomes strong. Quantum mechanics and its modern evolution left me with a theory of change and how to properly understand how one thing causes another. My interest was then in reversing this thought process and adapting it to another realm. We have an end state that we want, and I looked at all the changes that are needed to get to this end state from where we are now. I developed this analogy to explain how information flows around the world to cause particular actions. If the desired end state is a world that is more just, then the question is: What type of actions produce a world that is more just? And what sort of information flows lead to those actions? And then, where do these information flows originate? Once you understand this, you can see it is not just starting somewhere and ending elsewhere, but rather that cause and effect is a loop; here we are today, and we want to create an end state as a result of action. We act and by doing so bring the world into a new state of affairs, which we can consider our new starting point, and so this process of observe, think, act continues.



The "tableware of transparency" is so far limited to that handy office assistant, the mug. Mugs could have a soft focus Assange "effigy" (press photo) on them, or they could be overprinted with documents. The mug as public space. Courtesy of Metahaven.

**HUO:** Science, mathematics, quantum theory – all of these come together in your work. If one reads about your beginnings before WikiLeaks, one finds that you were not only instrumental in bringing the internet to Australia, but that you were also one of the pioneering, early hackers. You co-authored this book called *Underground: Tales of Hacking, Madness and Obsession on the Electronic Frontier*. I'm curious about your hacker background, and this book as well, since it seems to be a sort of fundament on which a lot of things were based afterwards.

**JA:** In my late teenage years, up until the

age of twenty, I was a computer hacker and a student in Melbourne. And I had an underground magazine called *International Subversive*. We were part of an international community of underground computer hackers. This was before the internet connected continents, but we had other ways of making international connections. So each country had its own internet, of a sort, but the world as a whole was intellectually balkanized into distinct systems and networks.

**HUO:** Like The WELL in the States.

**JA:** Right, that kind of thing, or ARPANET, which connected universities in the States. And something called x.25, run by the telecommunications companies, that banks and major companies used to link systems together. We, the underground community, sometimes bumped into each other deep inside these computer networks. Or we would meet at underground watering holes like QSD in France or ALTOS in Germany. But it was a very small community, with perhaps only twenty people at the elite level that could move across the globe freely and with regularity. The community was small and involved and active just before the internet, but then crossed into the embryonic internet, which was still not available to people outside of university research departments, US

military contractors, and the pentagon. It was a delightful international playground of scientists, hackers, and power. For someone who wanted to learn about the world, for someone who was developing their own philosophy of power, it was a very interesting time. Eventually our phones were tapped and there were multiple, simultaneous raids that resulted in close to six years of legal proceedings. The book covers my case, but I deliberately minimized my role so we could pull in the whole community, in the United States, in Europe, in England, and in Australia.

**HUO:** it also created a kind of connection between all these different local scenes? At that time, you were also known as an ethical hacker.

**JA:** Right, though I actually think most computer hackers back then were ethical, since that was the standard of the best people involved. Remember, this was an intellectual frontier, and it had very young people in it. It needed young people for the degree of mental adaptation necessary. Because it was an intellectual frontier, we had a range of people who were very bright, though not necessarily formally educated.

**HUO:** Was there a connection to America, to the beginnings of The WELL, to people like Stewart Brand, Bruce Sterling, or Kevin Kelly?

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Messages. These proposals feature nation branding for Iceland, and a cover from *Time* magazine. Courtesy of Metahaven.

**JA:** There was almost no connection. The WELL had influenced some parts of the computer hacking community in the United States, but we were deep underground, so most of our connections didn't rise above the light and we were proud of that discipline. Those who knew did not speak. Those who spoke did not know. The result was a distorted US-centric perception of the underground. In the United States, in particular, you had quite marginal computer hackers engaging in conferences but the people engaged in the really serious business, because of the risks involved, were almost completely invisible until they were arrested. The entry points into it were the bulletin boards – these were the central places, places like P-80 in the United States, and Pacific Island in Australia, which had public cover for a private side. But then, once reaching a certain level, people only used completely underground bulletin boards. There were on x.25 networks places like ALTOS in Hamburg where we would go to talk. ALTOS was one of the first, if not the first, multi-party chat system, but in order to get into it, you had to have x.25 credentials. While some bank workers and telecommunications workers would have access to these, teenagers would only have them if they were decent computer hackers, or if their fathers worked for the telecommunications company.



Petri Dishes (Image Economies): The uncontrolled lab experiment with geopolitics that is WikiLeaks, is signified by an expanding image economy, visualized here through a series of petri dishes. These proposals feature faces that, in the media, have become mentioned in a WikiLeaks context. Courtesy of Metahaven.

**HUO:** In a previous issue of *e-flux journal* I discussed a lot of the history of anarchists and piracy with Hakim Bey, who mentioned that as an anarchist he has never fetishized democracy, saying that “democracy, to be interesting for an anarchist, has to be direct democracy.”<sup>1</sup> When you worked as a hacker, were you inspired by anarchistic ideas?

**JA:** I wasn't personally. The anarchists' tradition revolving around figures like Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Peter Kropotkin was not

something on my horizon. My personal political inspirations were people like Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, anti-Stalinists in *The God That Failed*, and US radical traditions all the way up to the Black Panthers.

**HUO:** Liberation movements.

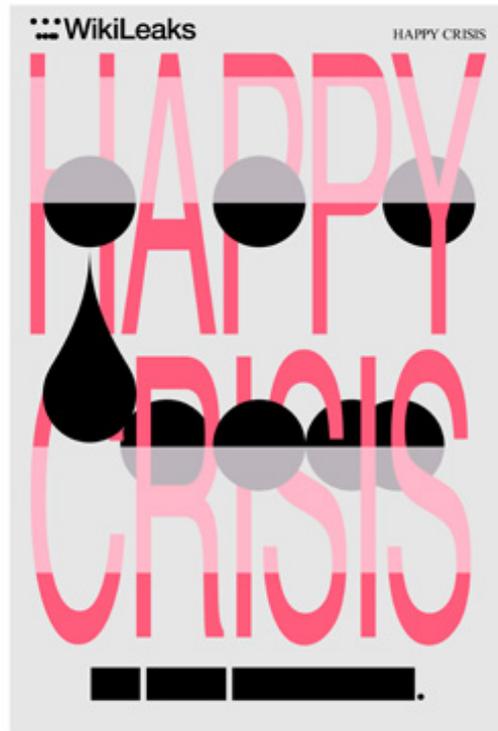
**JA:** Yes, the various liberation movements – in their emotional tone and force of will, not in intellectual content. That tradition really spread into some other things I did later, like the Cypherpunks, in 1993 and '94. 1994 was probably the peak of the Cypherpunk micro movement. Cypherpunk is a wordplay on Cyberpunk, the latter was always viewed as nonsense by real computer hackers – we were the living Cyberpunks while others were just talking about it, making artistic pastiche on our reality. We viewed the better books as a nice showing of the flag to the general public, but like most causes that are elitist and small, we had contempt for bowdlerized popularizations. The Cypherpunks were a combination of people from California, Europe, and Australia. We saw that we could change the nature of the relationship between the individual and the state using cryptography. I wouldn't say that we came from a libertarian political tradition as much as from a libertarian temperament, with particular individuals who were capable of thinking in abstractions, but wanting to make them real. We had many who were comfortable with higher mathematics, cryptography, engineering or physics who were interested in politics and felt that the relationship between the individual and the state should be changed and that the abuse of power by states needed to be checked, in some manner, by individuals.

**HUO:** Is this the fundament of WikiLeaks?

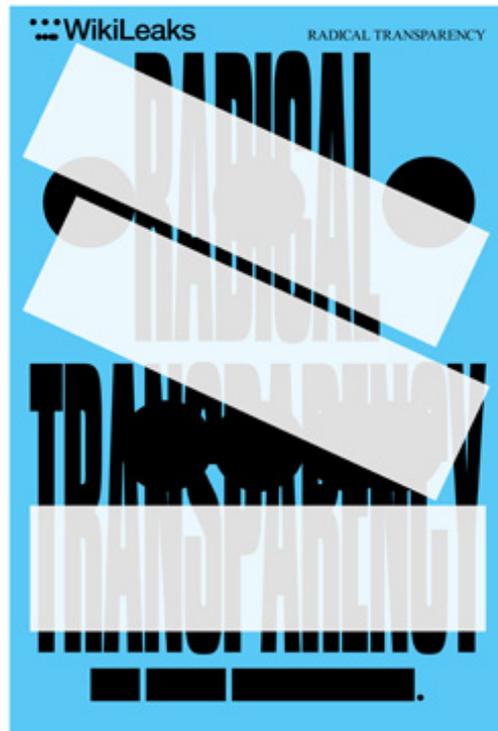
**JA:** Yes and no. There are many different intellectual strands that ended up in WikiLeaks that are unrelated to ideas swirling around the Cypherpunk community. But the use of mathematics and programming to create a check on the power of government, this was really the common value in the Cypherpunk movement.

**HUO:** And you were one of the protagonists?

**JA:** I was. There wasn't really a founding member or a founding philosophy but there were some initial principles, people like John Young, Eric Hughes, and Timothy C. May from California. We were a discussion group like the Vienna school of logical positivism. From our interactions certain ideas and values took form. The fascination for us was simple. It was not just the intellectual challenge of making and breaking these cryptographic codes and connecting people together in novel ways. Rather, our will came from a quite extraordinary notion of power, which was that with some clever mathematics you can, very simply – and this



Posters, screen print 120x180 cm, courtesy Triennale Design Museum / Graphic Design Worlds, Milan, Italy. Courtesy of Metahaven.



Posters, screen print 120x180 cm, courtesy Triennale Design Museum / Graphic Design Worlds, Milan, Italy. Courtesy of Metahaven.

seems complex in abstraction but simple in terms of what computers are capable of – enable any individual to say no to the most powerful state. So if you and I agree on a particular encryption code, and it is mathematically strong, then the forces of every superpower brought to bear on that code still cannot crack it. So a state can desire to do something to an individual, yet it is simply not possible for the state to do it – and in this sense, mathematics and individuals are stronger than superpowers.

**HUO:** Could this have been an epiphany that then led to WikiLeaks?

**JA:** Well, there is no singular epiphany. WikiLeaks is many different ideas pulled together, and certain economies permit it to be cheap enough to realize. There are some epiphanies, such as my theory of change, an understanding of what is important to do in life, an understanding of what information is important and what is not, ideas having to do with how to protect such an endeavor, and many small technical breakthroughs that go along the way. They're building blocks for my final view about what form things should take. It is a complex construction, like a truck, which has wheels, cranks, and gears, all contributing to the efficiency of the whole truck, and all of which need to be assembled in order for the truck to get to the destination that I want it to get to by a certain time. So to some degree the epiphany is not in the construction of this vehicle, because there are many little epiphanies in each part, but rather it is that there is a destination that this truck should go to and a way to get out of there.



Proposal for an N(G)O Logo: The “WL” acronym built of a constellation of circles demarcating distinct locations, “hosts” and “leaks” as basic shapes inspired from Google Maps pins; a proposal to reduce all iconography to its most basic level. Courtesy of Metahaven.

**HUO:** There's a path?

**JA:** Yes, there's a path, and therefore there needs to be a truck that will go down this path. Then, it becomes a matter of assembling all the pieces necessary for this truck, which is a complex machine, technically and logistically, in terms of political presentation and cause and

effect, and as an organization, and how I interact, personally, with all this. It's not a simple thing. I actually think that anyone who has built an institution around an idea will tell you this – that there are some ideas about where you want to go, but in order to get there you need to build an institution. In my case, I built – and got other people to help me build – both the machine and the institution.

**HUO:** So obviously then, because it's such a complex thing, I suppose it's not possible for you to just sketch it on a piece of paper.

**JA:** No, this would be like sketching democracy – something that's not possible to draw. There are all these different parts, and each has their own drawing. It's the ensemble of all these parts that makes WikiLeaks work like it does. But perhaps there are some economic epiphanies. There's a universe of information, and we can imagine a sort of Platonic ideal in which we have an infinite horizon of information. It's similar to the concept of the Tower of Babel. Imagine a field before us composed of all the information that exists in the world – inside government computers, people's letters, things that have already been published, the stream of information coming out of televisions, this total knowledge of all the world, both accessible and inaccessible to the public. We can as a thought experiment observe this field and ask: If we want to use information to produce actions that affect the world to make it more just, which information will do that? So what we ask for is a way to color the field of information before us, to take a yellow highlighter and mark the interesting bits – all the information that is most likely to have that effect on the world, which leads it toward the state we desire. But what is the signal that permits us to do that? What can we recognize when we look at the world from a distance? Can we somehow recognize those things that we should mark as worthy candidates to achieve change? Some of the information in this tremendous field, if you look at it carefully, is faintly glowing. And what it's glowing with is the amount of work that's being put into suppressing it. So, when someone wants to take information and literally stick it in a vault and surround it with guards, I say that they are doing economic work to suppress information from the world. And why is so much economic work being done to suppress that information? Probably – not definitely, but probably – because the organization predicts that it's going to reduce the power of the institution that contains it. It's going to produce a change in the world, and the organization doesn't like that vision. Therefore, the containing institution engages in constant economic work to prevent that change. So, if you search for that signal of suppression, then you

can find all this information that you should mark as information that should be released. So, it was an epiphany to see the signal of censorship to always be an opportunity, to see that when organizations or governments of various kinds attempt to contain knowledge and suppress it, they are giving you the most important information you need to know: that there is something worth looking at to see if it should be exposed and that censorship expresses weakness, not strength.

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The “fashion of transparency” could take on a decidedly sci-fi direction. These proposals work with three letters acronyms around Freedom of Information, and NGOs, and enlarged faces overprinted over shirts. These “Leaks” shirts engage in a sense of psychedelica. Courtesy of Metahaven.

**HUO:** So within that complex field of information this signal is actually a very clear sign.

**JA:** Yes, within that complexity. Censorship is not only a helpful economic signal; it is always an opportunity, because it reveals a fear of reform. And if an organization is expressing a fear of reform, it is also expressing the fact that it can be reformed. So, when you see the Chinese government engaging in all sorts of economic work to suppress information passing in and out of China on the internet, the Chinese government is also expressing a belief that it can be reformed by information flows, which is hopeful but easily understandable because China is still a political society. It is not yet a fiscalized society in the way that the United States is for example. The basic power relationships of the United States and other Western countries are described by formal fiscal relationships, for example one organization has a contract with another organization, or it has a bank account, or is engaged in a hedge. Those relationships cannot be changed by moderate political shifts. The shift needs to be large enough to turn contracts into paper, or change money flows.

**HUO:** And that’s why you mentioned when we last spoke that you’re optimistic about China?

**JA:** Correct, and optimistic about any organization, or any country, that engages in censorship. We see now that the US State

Department is trying to censor us. We can also look at it in the following way. The birds and the bees, and other things that can’t actually change human power relationships, are free. They’re left unmolested by human beings because they don’t matter. In places where speech is free, and where censorship does not exist or is not obvious, the society is so sewn up – so depoliticized, so fiscalized in its basic power relationships – that it doesn’t matter what you say. And it doesn’t matter what information is published. It’s not going to change who owns what or who controls what. And the power structure of a society is by definition its control structure. So in the United States, because of the extraordinary fiscalization of relationships in that country, it matters little who wins office. You’re not going to suddenly empty a powerful individual’s bank account. Their money will stay there. Their stockholdings are going to stay there, bar a revolution strong enough to void contracts.

**HUO:** It was around 2007 that WikiLeaks began developing contacts with newspapers. When was the first major coup?

**JA:** We had published a number of significant reports in July 2007. One was a detailed 2,000-page list of all the military equipment in Iraq and Afghanistan, including unit assignments and the entire force structure. That was actually important but, interestingly, too complex to be picked up by the press, and so it had no direct impact. The first to be “recognized by the international press” was a private intelligence report by Kroll, an international private intelligence agency. This was produced by their London office, at great expense to the new Kenyan government, who were trying to find out where Daniel arap Moi and his cronies had smuggled the Kenyan Treasury to. They managed to trace some three billion dollars worth of money, looted from Kenya, to London Banks, Swiss Banks, a 10,000 hectare ranch in Australia, properties in the US, companies in London, and so on.

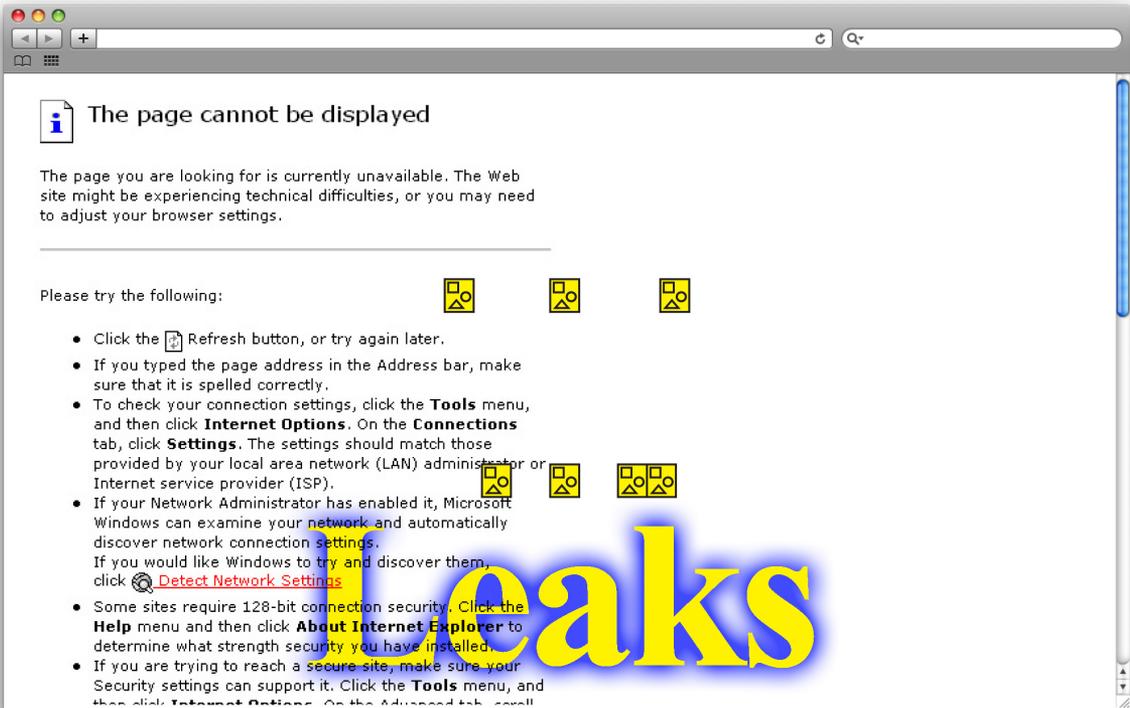
**HUO:** And that changed the Kenyan elections.

**JA:** It swung the electoral vote by 10 percent, changing the predicted result of the election and leading to a rather extraordinary series of events, which ended with an overhaul of the structure of the government and the Kenyan constitution.

**HUO:** So one could say that, for the first time, WikiLeaks produced reality?

**JA:** Yes. Remember that in the theory of change I outlined, we have a starting point. We have some observations about reality, like Kroll observing where Daniel arap Moi stashed all his money. Then that information came to us, and

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Proposal for "Leaks;" presence revealed through absence – a link to a domain of which the license has been revoked. Courtesy of Metahaven.

then we spread it around in a way designed to maximize impact. And it entered the minds of many people, and caused them to act. The result was a change in the Kenyan election, which then went on to produce many other changes.

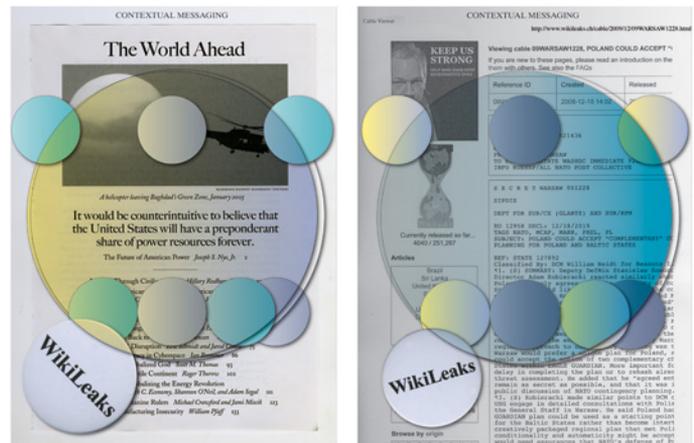
**HUO:** And what would you say was the next big production of reality after that?

**JA:** Some of them are harder to track. An election is fairly easy, because either the government or the opposition is elected. In Kenya, we saw a situation somewhere in the middle, where the opposition was elected, but the government wouldn't give up power, resulting in a power struggle. The next big disclosure was the two sets of the main manuals for Guantanamo Bay. We got one from 2003, which is the year after Guantanamo Bay started taking detainees, it revealed a new banality of evil. The Pentagon tried to say, "Oh, well, that was 2003. That was under General Miller." And the next year there was a different commander, so supposedly everything changed for the better. But courage is contagious, so someone stepped up to smuggle us the 2004 manual. I wrote a computer program to compare every single letter change between the 2003 Guantanamo Bay manual and the 2004 manual. We pulled out every goddamn difference and showed that the manual had gotten significantly worse; more despotic as time had advanced.

**HUO:** There is a question Julia Peyton-Jones wanted to ask you: To what extent do you think WikiLeaks prompted the current wave of protests in the Middle East?

**JA:** Well, we tried. We don't know precisely what the cause and effect was, but we added a lot of oil to the fire. It's interesting to consider what the possible interactions are, and it's a story that hasn't really been told before. There's a great Lebanese newspaper called *Al Akhbar* who in early December of last year started publishing analyses of our cables from a number of countries in Northern Africa, including Tunisia, and also our cables about Saudi Arabia. As a result, *Al Akhbar's* domain name was immediately attacked – redirected to a Saudi sex site. I didn't think there was such a thing, but apparently there is. Then, after *Al Akhbar* recovered they received a massive denial of service attack, and then much more sophisticated computer hackers came in and wiped them out entirely – their entire cable publishing operation, news stories, analyses, completely wiped out. The Tunisian government concurrently banned *Al Akhbar*, and WikiLeaks. Then, computer hackers who were sympathetic to us came and redirected the Tunisian government's own websites to us. There's one particular cable about Ben Ali's regime that covers his sort of internal, personal opulence

and abuse, the abuse of proceeds. The *New Yorker* had an article describing that this was actually reported by an American Ambassador.



Messages. In these sketches the laboratory petri dish, overwritten with circles forming the "WL" acronym, becomes a more neutral lens through which to observe the world, such as, a cable from Warsaw, or a page from Foreign Affairs magazine. Courtesy of Metahaven.

**HUO:** Right, that he had seen a cage with a tiger and abuses of power.

**JA:** Right, so some people have reported that the people in Tunisia were very upset to hear about these abuses in this cable, and that inspired them to revolt. Some parts of that may be true, though two weeks later there was also a man who set himself on fire, the 26-year-old computer technician, reportedly because of a dispute over a license in the market. And this took the rage to the streets. But my suspicion is that one of the real differences in the cables about Tunisia came in showing that the United States, if push came to shove, would support the army over Ben Ali. That was a signal, not just to the army, but to the other actors inside Tunisia, as well as to the surrounding states who might have been considering intervening with their intelligence services or military on behalf of Ben Ali. Similarly, some of the revelations about the Saudis caused Saudi Arabia to turn inward to deal with the fallout of those relations. And it is clear that Tunisia, as an example, then set off all the protests in the rest of the Middle East. So when we saw what was happening in Tunisia, we knew that Egypt was on the borderline, and we saw these initial protests in Egypt as a result of Tunisia.

We really tried very hard to get out lots and lots of cables, hundreds of cables, to show the abuses of Mubarak and so on, to give the protestors some additional fuel, but also to remove Western support for Mubarak. Now we also have Libya bordering Egypt. Working with the *Telegraph* in the UK, we pushed out 480 cables about Libya, revealing many abuses, but also intelligence about how the Libyan regime

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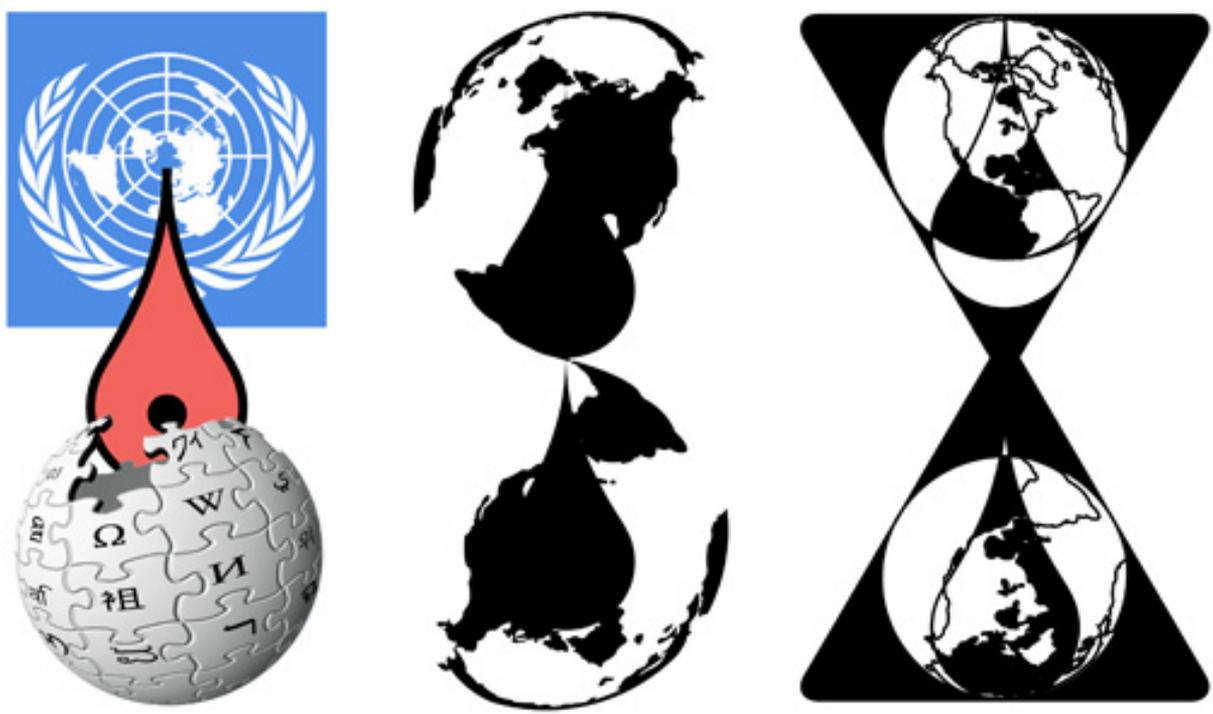
operated – we removed some of that Western support for the Libyan regime, and perhaps some of the support from the neighboring countries. The approach we took, and continue to take, with the demonstrations in the Middle East, has been to look at them as a pan-Arab phenomenon with different neighboring countries supporting each other in different ways. The elites – in most cases the dictatorial elite – of these countries prop each other up, and this becomes more difficult if we can get them to focus on their own domestic issues. Information produced by the revolutionaries in Egypt on how to conduct a revolution is now spreading into Bahrain. So this is being pushed out. We have pan-Arab activists spreading, and there exists Western support for these opposition groups, or for the traditional dictatorial leadership. And that support can be affected by exposing not just the internal abuses of power on the part of the regime, but also by exposing the nature of the relationship between the United States and these dictatorships. When the nature of this is exposed, we have a situation much like what actually happened with Joseph Biden, the Vice President of the United States, who last year called me a “hi-tech terrorist.” This year, he said that Mubarak was not a dictator, but presumably a democrat, and that he should not

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stand down. Look at how the behavior of Washington changed with regard to Mubarak just before he fell. After we released these cables about the relationship between the United States and Mubarak in foreign military subsidies and the FBI’s training of torturers in Egypt, it was no longer possible for Biden to make these kinds of statements. It became completely impossible, because their own ambassadors were saying, just the year before, that Suleiman and Mubarak had been extremely abusive to the Egyptian people in so many ways – and that the United States had been involved in that abuse, in some way. So, if you’re able to pull out regional support and Western support, and the underground activists are good, and are sharing and spreading information with each other, then I think we can actually get rid of quite a few of these regimes. Already we’re seeing that Yemen and Libya might be the next to go.

**HUO:** And you’ve got cables there as well.

**JA:** Yes, there was a big one we did for Yemen, which revealed that the president had conspired with the United States to have the US bomb Yemen and say that the Yemeni Air Force did it. So that was a big revelation that we released in December of last year. Although the President is still there, he has been handing out



Proposal for an N(G)O Logo: The WikiLeaks logo, as it consists two worlds “leaking,” may be recreated using the UN globe, the Google Maps pin turned upside down (becoming a leak), and the Wikipedia globe. The two worlds may also be joined together to form an S-shaped symbol. Courtesy of Metahaven.

tremendous concessions as a result. That's been happening throughout the Arab world now – some of them are literally handing out cash, and land, and offering cabinet posts to some of the more liberal forces in the country. They've been pulling election timetables forward, saying they'll resign at the next election – many interesting and important types of concessions. So, although I think we will see a few more go down, in the end it actually doesn't really matter whether the leader is removed or not. What matters is that the power structure of the government changes. If you make the concessions that the people want, you're actually nearly all of the way when you want to be a just and responsible elite.

**HUO:** Constitutional monarchies?

**JA:** Right, they can keep their monarch. In practice, you may have a society that is closer to what people want, a society that's much more civilized. But let me first qualify all that I've just said. I've received reports from people who have been on the ground in Egypt, in Bahrain, and have come over and briefed me personally on what's happening. And it seems very good that, for example, when Mubarak was removed he was the head of a patronage network that extended down into every position in Egypt, to the chief of the lawyers' syndicate to the groceries industry, to particular people in the army, and so forth. So every institution and every city council had its own mini-revolution after Mubarak was removed. I think that this change in the power structures underneath will, to a large degree, confine and constrain whoever assumes power later. Still, with these revolutions we have to be careful not to end up with something like the Orange Revolution, where you had liberal forces, but ones that were being literally paid by the United States and Western Europe. They opened up and liberalized the Ukraine in important ways, but the result was that opportunists inside the country rose up and opportunists outside the country came in and really destroyed the social fabric of the country, leading within five years to a backlash that installed a much more Soviet-style president with close ties to Russia. These situations still need monitoring. One of the documents used by the revolutionaries in Cairo is quite interesting to consider. After Mubarak fell, we witnessed an extraordinary change in rhetoric from Hillary Clinton and the White House, from "Mubarak is a great guy and he should stay," to "Isn't it great what the Egyptian people have done? And isn't it great how the United States did it for them?" Likewise, there is an idea that these great American companies, Facebook and Twitter, gave the Egyptian people this revolution and liberated Egypt. But the most popular guide for the revolutionaries was a document that

spread throughout the soccer clubs in Egypt, which themselves were the most significant revolutionary community groups. If you read this document, you see that on the first page it says to be careful not to use Twitter and Facebook as they are being monitored. On the last page: do not use Twitter or Facebook. That is the most popular guide for the Egyptian revolution. And then we see Hillary Clinton trying to say that this was a revolution by Twitter and Facebook.

**HUO:** What about Iran? Does WikiLeaks have releases connected to Iran?

**JA:** Yes. There have been more demonstrations there recently, so we've been releasing material on Iran consistently since December. And the reason it has been consistent is quite interesting. Media partners that we've worked with – such as *Der Spiegel*, *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *El Pais*, and *Le Monde* – have already been inclined to produce stories critical of Iran, so they trawled through the cables to find bad stories about Iran and have been publishing them since December at a tremendous pace. Beyond publishing the underlying cables, we haven't actually done any of our own work on Iran. But this is actually because the Western mainstream press is, as far as I can tell, inspired to produce bad stories about Iran as a result of geopolitical influences. So we didn't need to assist, while with Egypt we had to do all the work. We'd given these Western papers all the material, and they didn't do a goddamn thing about Egypt. However, this changed later on when we partnered with *The Telegraph*, who listened closely to our predictions.

**HUO:** When you began working with what you call "media partners," was that a new strategy of concerted action of some sort?

**JA:** It was a concerted action for a number of reasons. We've partnered with twenty or so newspapers across the world, to increase the total impact, including by encouraging each one of these news organizations to be braver. It made them braver, though it did not entirely work in the case of *The New York Times*. For example, one of the stories we found in the Afghan War Diary was from "Task Force 373," a US Special Forces assassination squad. Task Force 373 is working its way down an assassination list of some 2,000 people for Afghanistan, and the Kabul government is rather unhappy about these extrajudicial assassinations – there is no impartial procedure for putting a name on the list or for taking a name off the list. You're not notified if you're on the list, which is called the Joint Priority Effects List, or JPTEL. It's supposedly a kill or capture list. But you can see from the material that we released that about 50 percent of cases were just kill – there's no option

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to “capture” when a drone drops a bomb on someone. And in some cases Task Force 373 killed innocents, including one case where they attacked a school and killed seven children and no bona fide targets, and attempted to cover the whole thing up. This discovery became the cover story for *Der Spiegel*. It became an article in *The Guardian*. A story was written for *The New York Times* by national security correspondent Eric Schmitt, and that story was killed. It did not appear in *The New York Times*.

**HUO:** I’m very interested in the whole idea of projects that are unrealized for having been censored, for being too big, or for other reasons. What are your unrealized projects or dreams?

**JA:** There are so many. I’m not sure it’s quite right to say they’re unrealized because a lot will hopefully be realized, or are in the process of being realized. We’re still too young to look back and say, oh, this is something we never managed to do. But there is one thing we tried to do and failed at, and it’s very interesting. So, it was my view early on that the whole of the existing Fourth Estate was not big enough for the task of making sense of information that hadn’t previously been public. To take our most recent case as an example, all the journalists in the world would not be enough to make complete sense of the 400,000 documents we released about Iraq, and, of course, they have other things to write about as well. I always knew this would be the case. I was very confident about having enough source material. So what we wanted to

do was to take all that volunteer labor that is spent on writing about things that are not terribly important, and redirect it to material that we released, material that has a real potential for change if people assess it, analyze it, contextualize it, and push it back into local communities. I tried very hard to make that happen, but it didn’t. I had looked at all these people writing Wikipedia articles, and all these people writing blogs about the issue du jour, whatever that was, especially in relation to war and peace. And I thought about the tremendous amount of effort that goes into that. When some of these bloggers are asked why they don’t do original stories, and why they don’t have opinion pieces and analysis of media output, they say, “Well, we don’t have original sources so we can’t write original material.” So, surely, rather than write a Wikipedia article on something that would have no political influence, the opportunity to write about a secret intelligence report revealed to the world at that very moment would surely be irresistible, or so I thought.

But I’ll give you an example to explain what I found instead. I released a secret intelligence report from the US Army Intelligence on what happened in Fallujah in the first battle of Fallujah in 2004, and it looked like a very good document – secret classification labels all over it, nice maps, color, a good, combined military and political description of what had happened, even *Al Jazeera*’s critical involvement. And there was analysis of what the US should have done,

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“New Alphabet.” Proposals for new characters (as part of the Arial, Courier and Times typefaces) indicating censorship, hosting, leaking, mirroring, and WikiLeaks. Courtesy of Metahaven.

which was to conduct a political and psychological shaping operation before they went in. In the case of Fallujah, some US Military contractors had been grabbed and hung in the town, and the US response gradually became an invasion of the town. So, rather than being a carefully pre-planned operation, it had been a continual escalation. They hadn't set up the necessary political and media factors to support the military objective. It was an extremely interesting document, and we sent it to 3,000 people. Nothing appeared for five days. Then, a small report by a friend of mine, Shaun Waterman at UPI, appeared as a newswire, and then another one by a guy, Davis Isenberg, who spends half his time at the Cato Institute, but published this for the *Asia Times*. But before the UPI report, there was nothing by any bloggers, by any Wikipedia-type people, by any leftist intellectuals, by any Arab intellectuals, nothing. What's going on? Why didn't anyone spend time on this extraordinary document? My conclusion is twofold. First, to be generous, these groups don't know how to lead the intellectual debate. They've been pacified into being reactive by the presence of the mainstream press. The front page of *The New York Times* says something and they react to that. Find what is newsworthy and tell the public that it is newsworthy. That's the generous interpretation, but I think the main factor, however, for those who are not professional writers, and perhaps many who are, is simply that they use their writing to advertise their values as conforming to those of their paper. The aim of most non-professional writers is to take the cheapest possible content that permits them to demonstrate their value of conformity to the widest possible selection of the group that they wish to gain the favor of.

So if one were a European leftist, why wouldn't going through that secret Fallujah document, assessing it, and writing about it properly advertise one's own values to their group? Well, actually, it would. But the cost-reward ratio doesn't work. The cost is that they would have to read and understand a thirty-page document, and then write about it in a way that would get this new information into their group and prove that it was important. But *The New York Times* and other mainstream press vehicles already do that, and they've also created the market for a response. One only needs to read a single article in *The New York Times* and issue a riposte or agreement. The frame and the audience have already been primed.

**HUO:** Do you have dreams for the future?

**JA:** Yes, many. I'll tell you about one, which is interesting. Orwell's dictum, "He who controls the present controls the past, and he who controls the past controls the future," was never

truer than it is now. With digital archives, with these digital repositories of our intellectual record, control over the present allows one to perform an absolutely untraceable removal of the past. More than ever before, the past can be made to completely, utterly, and irrevocably disappear in an undetectable way. Orwell's dictum came about as result of what happened in 1953 to the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*. That year, Stalin died and Beria fell out of favor. The *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* had a page and a half on Beria from before he fell out of favor, and it was decided that the positive description of Beria had to go. So, an addendum page was made and sent to all registered holders of this encyclopedia with instructions specifying that the previous page should be pasted over with the new page, which was an expanded section on the Bering Strait. However, users of the encyclopedia would later see that the page had been pasted over or ripped out – everyone became aware of the replacement or omission, and so we know about it today. That's what Orwell was getting at. In 2008, one of the richest men in the UK, Nadhmi Auchi – an Iraqi who grew rich under one of Saddam Husain's oil ministries and left to settle in the UK in the early 1980s – engaged in a series of libel threats against newspapers and blogs. He had been convicted of corruption in France in 2003 by the then magistrate Eva Joly in relation to the Elf Aquitaine scandal.

**HUO:** She was the investigating judge. I remember reading about it when living in France at the time. It was in the daily news every day.

**JA:** Right. So Nadhmi Auchi has interests all over the world. His Luxembourg holding company holds over 200 companies. He has companies under his wife's name in Panama, interests in Lebanon and the Iraqi telecommunications market, and alleged involvement in the Italian arms trade. He also had a \$2 billion investment around Chicago. He was also the principle financier of a man called Tony Rezko, who was one of Obama's most important fundraisers, for his various pre-presidential campaigns, such as for the Senate. Rezko was also a fundraiser for Rob Blagojevich, the now disgraced Governor of Illinois. Rezko ended up being convicted of corruption in 2008. But in 2008, Barack Obama was involved in a run against Hillary for the presidential nomination, so the media turned their attention to Barack Obama's fundraisers. And so attention was turned to Tony Rezko, who had been involved in a house purchase for Barack Obama. And attention was then turned to where some of the money for this house purchase might have come from, and attention was then turned to Nadhmi Auchi, who at that time had given Tony Rezko \$3.5 million in

violation of court conditions. Auchi then instructed Carter-Ruck, a libel firm in the UK, to go after stories mentioning aspects of his 2003 corruption conviction in France. And those stories started to be removed, everywhere.



Petri Dishes (Image Economies): Other motifs are the globe, and camouflage patterns made transparent. Courtesy of Metahaven.

**HUO:** So they were literally erased from the digital archive?

**JA:** Yes. *The Guardian* pulled three of the stories. *The Telegraph* pulled one. And there are a number of others. If you go to the former URLs of those stories you get a “page not found.” It does not say that it was removed as the result of a legal threat. As far as we can tell, the story not only ceased to exist, but ceased to have ever have existed. Parts of our intellectual record are disappearing in such a way that we cannot even tell that they have ever existed.

**HUO:** Which is very different from books, or newspapers, when some copies always survive.

**JA:** Right. It’s very different from newspapers, and it’s very different from the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*. The current situation is much, much worse than that. So what is to be done? I want to make sure that WikiLeaks is incorruptible in that manner. We have never unpublished something that we have published. And it’s all very well for me to say that, but how can the public be assured? They can’t. There are some things that we have traditionally done, such as providing cryptographic hashes of the files that we have released, allowing for a partial check if you have a copy of a specific list of cryptographic hashes. But that’s not good enough. And we’re an organization whose content is under constant attack. We have had over one hundred serious legal threats, and many intelligence and other actions against us. But this problem, and its solution, is also the solution to another problem, which is: How can we globally, consistently name a part of our intellectual history in such a way that we can accurately converse about it? And by “converse” I

don’t mean a conversation like we’re having now, but rather one that takes place through history and across space. For example, if I start talking about the First Amendment, you know what I mean, within this current context of our conversation. I mean the First Amendment of the United States. But what does that mean? It’s simply an abstraction of something. But what if the First Amendment was only in digital form, and someone like Nadhmi Auchi made an attack on that piece of text and made it disappear forever, or replaced it with another one? Well, we know the First Amendment is spread everywhere, so it’s easily checkable. If we are confused in our conversation and unsure of what we’re talking about, or we really want to get down to the details, it’s in so many places that if I find a copy, it’s going to be the same as the copy you find. But this is because it’s a short and very ancient and very popular document. In the cases of these Nadhmi Auchi stories, there were eight that were removed, but actually this removal of material as a result of political or legal threats, it’s happening everywhere. This is just the tip of the iceberg. And there are other forms of removal that are less intentional but more pernicious, which can be a simple matter of companies going under along with the digital archives they possess. So we need a way of consistently and accurately naming every piece of human knowledge, in such a way that their name arises out of the knowledge itself, out of its textual, visual, or aural representation, where the name is inextricably coupled to what it actually is. If we have that name, and if we use that name to refer to some information, and someone tries to change the contents, then it is either impossible or completely detectable by anyone using the name.

And actually, there is a way of creating names in such a way that they emerge from the inherent intellectual content of something, with no extrinsic component. Now, to make this a bit clearer, look at URLs as a name for something. There is the text for the *King James Bible* in Project Gutenberg, as a URL. It is the short, convenient name for this – we pass it around, and it expands to the text of the *King James Bible*. The problem with URLs is that they are authority names. A URL goes to some company or organization, and the name is completely controlled by the company or organization, which means that Project Gutenberg could conceivably copy the Talmud over the *King James Bible* but the “URL name” would remain the same. It is simply up to the whim of whoever controls that domain name.

**HUO:** It’s private.

**JA:** Exactly. We all now suffer from the privatization of words, a privatization of those

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fundamental abstractions human beings use to communicate. The way we refer to our common intellectual record is becoming privatized, with different parts of it being soaked up into domain names controlled by private companies, institutions or states.

And we could have a sort of deliberate, pernicious change, like someone replacing “King James Bible” with “Talmud.” Of course, that is unlikely to happen, but it is more likely that these companies will simply stop caring about that information. It no longer becomes profitable, or the company goes under. Or you have an important archive, and powerful figures are simply removing bits of history. So I’ve come up with this scheme to name every part of our intellectual history, and every possible future part of our intellectual history. And you can actually see the desire to do this as already being expressed in impoverished forms. When you look at something like TinyURL, or bit.ly, or one of these URL shorteners, you see that they are creating a short name from a longer and less comprehensible name, which is a URL. And those longer names are also short names or abstractions of whole texts, like the *King James Bible*.

We can also see it with dot-coms. Why shouldn’t URLs be company, type of company, then, say, Coca-Cola? It could be us.beverages.company.Coca-Cola, right? But instead we just have coca-cola.com. We just go straight there with one word. And so, in our human language, we use words in such a way that we don’t need to constantly provide a map with everything we say. Instead of having a big tree, it’s a flat name space. Similarly, services like TinyURL are popular because it’s just enough to get there. So my scheme is to pull out of every transmissible piece of intellectual content and intrinsic name that is mathematically bonded with that content. There’s no registration, no server, no company that controls the coupling between a particular name and a piece of information. For example, for Project Gutenberg, a number of domain name registrars and Project Gutenberg itself couple the URL to *King James Bible*. And when you pass around that URL, you are actually passing around a dependence on the authority of the whole domain name system, and the dependence on the authority and the longevity of Project Gutenberg itself.

**HUO:** So it becomes a kind of digital robustness.

**JA:** That’s right, and the idea is to create an intellectual robustness. So if you think about citations when using URLs, if we make an intellectual work, we stand on the shoulders of giants, which we all do, and we cite our influences in some way – not necessarily in a

formal academic sense, but we simply refer to them by linking to the original thing you were looking at. URLs are an example of how we become intellectually dependent on this citation mechanism. But if that citation mechanism is actually like plasticine, and it is decaying all around us – if oligarchs and billionaires are in there ripping out bits of history, or connections between one part of history and another, because it interferes with their agenda – then the intellectual constructs that we are building up about our civilization are being built on something that is unstable. We are building an intellectual scaffold for civilization out of plasticine.

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T-shirt as public surface. This proposal has a leaked cable boldly overprinting a shirt together with the “WL” circles. Courtesy of Metahaven.

**HUO:** So in that sense it’s actually regressive compared to the book. One can’t remove parts of a published book in the same way once the book is out in the world.

**JA:** Exactly. So this new idea that I want to introduce to protect the work of WikiLeaks can also be extended to protect all intellectual products. All creative works that can be put into digital form can be linked in a way that depends on nothing but the intellectual content of the material itself – no reliance on remote servers or any organization. It is simply a mathematical

function on the actual intellectual content, and people would need nothing other than this function.

**HUO:** So that's your dream, that this could be implemented somehow.

**JA:** I think it's more than a dream, actually. It's been realized. It will be a new standard that, I hope, will apply to every intellectual work, a consistent way of naming every piece of intellectual creation, anything that can be digitized. And so, if we have a blog post, it will have a unique name. And if the post changes, the name will change, but the post and the name are always completely coupled. If we have a sonata and a recording of it, then it has a unique name. If we have a film in digitized form, then it has a unique name. If we have a leaked, classified document that we release, it has a unique name. And it's not possible to change the underlying document without changing the name. I think it's very important – a kind of indexing system for the Tower of Babel, or pure knowledge.

**HUO:** I also suppose most people don't know about the danger that the archive can just be eliminated, no?

**JA:** No, they don't, because the newspapers try to keep it all quiet. And everyone else tries to keep it quiet. If they don't, they will look weak, and they'll look like they've betrayed their readership by removing something their readership was interested in. And they'll encourage further attacks, because someone was successful in the first one. It is actually quite extraordinary that in the UK libel law, mentioning that you have removed something can be argued to be libelous. We saw this in a really flagrant case, where I had won the Index on Censorship Award for fighting against censorship.

**HUO:** I was on the jury for it this year. I read that WikiLeaks won the Freedom of Expression award two years ago.

**JA:** Oh really? Right, so after I won this, Martin Bright wrote a blog post in the *New Statesman* saying it was nice to meet Julian, and so on and so forth. And the next part of his blog post mentioned that these articles about Nadhmi Auchi's conviction for corruption have been disappearing. And here are the titles – he just put their titles in, as they were in the newspapers. A legal attack was then made on that particular blog post, the particular one that said we had won an award for anti-censorship.

And it was then censored. The list of articles was removed, and then the whole post was removed. That's how I became interested in Nadhmi Auchi, and we managed to find all these articles and get hold of a huge Pentagon report on Auchi's activities. And we managed to have the issue raised in Parliament, where they had a

90-minute discussion on libel. But there's another big story; that Martin Bright lost his job at the *New Statesman*.

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→ *To be continued in "In Conversation with Julian Assange, Part II."*

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Hans Ulrich Obrist is a Swiss curator and art critic. In 1993, he founded the Museum Robert Walser and began to run the Migrateurs program at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris where he served as a curator for contemporary art. In 1996 he co-curated Manifesta 1, the first edition of the roving European biennial of contemporary art. He presently serves as the Co-Director, Exhibitions and Programmes and Director of International Projects at the Serpentine Gallery in London.

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Hans Ulrich Obrist, "In Conversation with Hakim Bey," *e-flux journal*, no. 21 (December 2010). See <http://e-flux.com/journal/view/187>.

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