Secret Killers “After WikiLeaks”: Mapping, evolutions, and taxonomy of radical leaking

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Introduction

This paper is concerned with mapping experimentations of online leaks projects that followed WikiLeaks. The period of initial popularisation/infamy of WikiLeaks (2006-2015) correlates with an emergence of over 90 less-known radical online disclosure projects. These used anonymity and encryption as part of a networked socio-technological construct to empower publicity with an ethos similar to early WikiLeaks: anonymously uploaded secrets will be widely shared. As Greenberg (2012) summarised the thinking of the time, "This machine kills secrets". Yet, this radical transparency machine was a decentralised and widely disparate ecosystem in terms of project make-up, afforded practices, and efficacy. Scholarship on specific projects inspired by WikiLeaks in that time period (see Coleman, 2014; Heemsbergen, 2014: for work on AnonLeaks for example), new formations of online journalistic practice dependent on 'megaleaks', (Woodall, 2017) and theoretical work on the methodologies of digital disclosure (Hansen and Flyverbom, 2015) exist in the literature. Yet, systematic study of the leaks ecosystem itself and its (transnational) materiality remains underdeveloped.

This paper offers empirical representation of the evolution of leaks projects "After WikiLeaks" through interpretation of various observable socio-technical vectors to build a taxonomy of online leaking. It also maps the visible interrelationships between sites via social network analysis (SNA) to rather surprising results. Beyond documenting evidence towards a socio-technical taxonomy of leaks sites, discussion of our findings considers how an ecology of digital leaks served (and severed) normative ties to problematic equations of 'transparency' and democracy (Flyverbom, 2016; Hansen and Flyverbom, 2015) in the digital world. Specifically, we offer a critical assessment of leaks sites' radical disclosures though a frame of governmentality and agonistic and algorithmic (Heemsbergen, 2016; Ananny and Crawford, 2016) democracy.

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Methodology

The provenance of the paper's claims follows from mixed methods that combine interpretive open coding of empirically observable and measurable characteristics of leaks sites with Social Network Analysis (SNA) of those same sites' makeup and relations (n:94). Open coding offers a way to evoke clusters of specific socio-technical practice including affordances tied to the materiality of user and technical practice as well as vectors such as self-identified thematic focus (issue, region, etc.) and measures of publication efficacy for each site. These observations lead to taxonomy of leaks sites that cluster to groupings from which unique and sometimes agonistic normative governmental functions can be inferred. We use taxonomy over typology to reference the data-driven clustering and lack of ideal type (Smith, 2002) within the agonistic ecology.

Further insight is given by mapping sites' relations to each other through SNA. Our SNA identifies the year with the highest number of active leaks sites and finds interlinks via employment of various Digital Methods Initiative tools. Gephi is used for visualisations and measures to determine discernible patterns within the network based off the algorithmic work of Blondel (2008). If nothing else, the SNA offers unique visibility to how leaking sites were organised and structured in ways not previously reported.

Methodologically, the work links media theory with democratic concerns of governmentality through the materiality of online leaks sites practice. It utilises methods that combine and contrast algorithmic insights of SNA with 'traditional' social science coding and categorisation to better interpret data and infer their normative political implications. Understanding the materiality of leaks practice from this perspective opens for analysis how governmentality functions through digital disclosure mechanisms that are embedding in society and critiques what this means democratically. An archeology of leaks sites before WikiLeaks - imagined (BlackNet) or real (LiveLeaks) - is interesting, but outside scope. Assessing the extent certain leaks sites successfully dominate media discourse over others remains tricky insofar as causation and correlation become conflated. Nevertheless, this project produces nuanced findings of the life and death of Secret Killers "After WikiLeaks".

Findings

At a macro level, an ecology of leaks sites blossomed and died. As of 2017 only a handful of sites remained online (regardless of their efficacy) from the original 94. We also note that that over 90% of the sites thematically coded as 'mimics' of WikiLeaks in form and function failed to produce any new data at all and were subsequently abandoned; the purchase of decentralised radical transparency as governance (Heemsbergen, 2016) remains questionable in decentralised material practice. Considering the lack of visible connectivity and community between sites may offer some insight towards why so many sites individually failed. The outliers that persist offer cogent lessons towards the ability of internet-based media practice to construct proto-institutions of governance (Skelcher et al., 2013) linked to agonistic democratic theory.

Meso trends produce valuable insight to how leaks sites' socio-technical materiality shape their political efficacy and normative goals. For instance, some sites offered democratic value through crowdsourced re-mediation of already leaked data, while others eschewed the traditional ethics of whistleblowing-leaking and incorporated active hacking elements to garner new data. Other emergent clusters include the leaks-as-a-service software-only models (think SecureDrop) that are increasingly being used by major media companies. This says nothing of the reactionary state-based 'leaks' sites that communicated state security as the reason for accepting anonymous data in explicit opposition to an ethos of public disclosure.

Taken together, a nuanced picture of a leaks ecology emerges from the data. We can see the ethos of a single actor of radical transparency evolve into a diverse transnational web of material leaking and publishing practices. Our full paper concludes with consideration of how the public information created by the diverse ecology of sites tested the limits of radical democratic theory that media (Dahlberg, 2011) and government (Wingenbach, 2011) scholars rely on for emergent proto-institutions to revitalise shapes of democracy.

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