Jason Russell and Julian Assange: Heralds of the Age of Uncertainty?"

This article is made up of notes for a talk at the University of Southern California conference to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the joint two-year MSc degree in Global Communications with the Department of Media and Communications at LSE. It draws upon my book 'WikiLeaks: News In The Networked Era" (Polity, 2012) and a forthcoming Polis report to be published with the International Broadcasting Trust in autumn 2012.

Jason Russell

What is the impact on the public sphere of novel acts of political communications such as WikiLeaks and the Kony2012 campaign? What can mainstream journalism and civic society learn from these new network exploits?

Both WikiLeaks and Invisible Children's Kony2012 are examples of networked journalism exploits.

They have shown extraordinary ability – much of it uncontrolled and unplanned for – to tap into the affordances of the Internet, but also of mainstream media and wider networks of political communications.

Unprecedented Acts

Julian Assange

They have achieved unprecedented acts of journalism: WikiLeaks published the biggest cache of classified documents in the history of journalism – material that shed light upon the military and diplomatic operations of the world's most powerful nation at a critical moment in international relations.

Kony2012 was the most effective viral campaign video ever reaching a massive audience more quickly than any other advocacy publication in its field.

They both represent challenges to mainstream mediation practices in the digital age.

In the case of WikiLeaks it is the challenge to the claim made by MSM to be a watchdog of power – and to political authorities in their claim to democratic legitimacy, accountability and transparency.

Two Challengers

In the case of Kony2012 it was a challenge to the mainstream development, human rights and humanitarian NGOs' and their use of advocacy and communications policies. Kony2012 showed an ability to bring its cause to the attention of a particularly hard-to-reach demographic of young people raising funds and awareness in its wake. It also raised a range of ethical and political issues around communications means and ends.

WikiLeaks and Kony2012 have been subject to widespread and serious critiques of their ethics, methods, objectives, and sustainability. Neither organisation is particularly transparent or democratic in their operations. Indeed, both are dominated by the personality and ideology of one person.

Kony2012 has been attacked (including by this author) for mistaken objectives, incomplete information, patronising and damaging stereotypes, gross simplifications, and superficial, transient engagement with supporters. I have also argued that it is not a profound formal innovation of the digital age, but rather a clever tactical synthesis of offline campaigning, celebrity endorsement, consumerism and sentimental narcissism. It is a very good case of what my colleague Professor Chouliaraki describes as 'post-humanitarian communications.'[1]

Celebrity Lobbying

The online campaign urged users to lobby for celebrity and political endorsement to tap into both social networks and mainstream media. The 'clicktivist' mission was primarily further networking rather than informing, engaging or even fundraising (though that was a successful outcome, too). This built on Invisible Children's previous work in creating a base of offline supporters mainly amongst young church going students in southern USA. It's emphasis on networking as the goal of the campaign in itself was the secret to its success.

It probably won't work. Kony is unlikely to be caught and the damage done to western perceptions of Africa and through the disappointed idealism of Kony2012 supporters will be more significant than its effect on human rights in Africa.

Perhaps its most positive outcome will be thanks to another networked effect that it had that was entirely unintended. It provoked an instant and extensive reaction from online citizens who mobilised widespread opposition to the campaign that helped bring more nuanced, informed and progressive arguments to bear upon the debate.

The Real Triumph

It was 'StopKony' that was the real triumph for engagement and coherent argument online. It also mobilised expert and mainstream media into a more balanced and critical treatment of Jason Russell's personal project.

I don't want to draw the parallels between Kony2012 and WikiLeaks too closely. But in its heyday of 2010 WikiLeaks was also a network exploit. It tapped into social networks to disseminate its material, garner support and to fund-raise. It was the Internet that provided it with the ability to safeguard its material by moving and duplicating files on mirrored websites. It was the global nature of the Internet that allowed WikiLeaks to reach a massive audience but also to exist as a trans-national organisation not subject to the regulatory, legal, economic and political pressure that constrain mainstream media based in one state.

WikiLeaks was also subject to a critique. Much of this was a political attack by those in power both in government and the media who resented what was an illegal action of leaking and a threat to their gatekeeper role for information. WikiLeaks was also the subject of criticism by those in mainstream media who worked with the organisation on publication of the major leaks of 2010. Essentially, it was accused of irresponsibility in the widest sense. It had a different risk calculation both in terms of having to protect itself as an institution and in terms of protecting the subjects of its disclosures.

Practical Lessons

We can learn practical as well as academic lessons from from Kony2012. NGOs, for example, need to examine their motives in marketing and networking. Are they any more open, honest, and self-critical? Do they foster participation or merely support? Why don't they invest more in creating open local media in areas where they operate? Is their relationship with the Internet merely exploitative? Is their use of imagery and celebrity any less exploitative than Kony2012?

We can learn from WikiLeaks. Is MSM too complicit with power? Is it too risk-averse? Has it the ability to exploit networks of the public, but also of organisations such as WikiLeaks? Can MSM handle these asymmetric ethical relationships where partners have different priorities and principles?

Age of Uncertainty

We are in an age of uncertainty. In the real world: who properly predicted the current western economic collapse, for example? And in the media world where giants like Facebook can become dominant within a decade and yet might also disappear.

We are also in an age of complexity. Again, our real worlds are becoming more complex. Our personal and social lives are more individualised, unstable and multifaceted. Our personal media lives are becoming more multi-lateral, multi-platform, multi-sourced. And mediation itself becomes more complex even with technological convergence and corporate consolidation. We have more potential sources of information and networks for communication that overlap and hybridise through technological, corporate and social reformations.

Questions For Research

So what are the research questions that arise related to these new network exploits? They may be transient but the conditions that allowed them to arise and to be effective will continue to exist and evolve. Instead of judging them discretely I would suggest the following lines of inquiry:

1. What impact do these phenomenon have upon mainstream media?
2. How representative are they of other trends in online networks?
3. What kind of ethical typology around editorial production is emerging?
4. How sustainable are they?

In other words I think it is time to move on from our instinctive reactions – Wow! Or Argh! Theoretical templates are useful in this process but first attention should be paid to the immediate significance of these networked exploits as practice. In that sense, media study must also become something of a networked exploit tapping into its own resources but also engaging directly with current applied challenges.

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[1] **Post-humanitarianism : Humanitarian communication beyond a politics of pity** Lilie Chouliaraki

International Journal of Cultural Studies 2010 13: 107 DOI: 10.1177/1367877909356720

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