

With the current volley of books coming out right now about Julian Assange, WikiLeaks, and the ins-and-outs of his relations with various major news organizations, there's a danger that we're going to miss the bigger story of what WikiLeaks really represents. In the last few years, a wide array of small-d democracy and transparency activists have been hard at work using new tools and methods to open up powerful institutions and make them more accountable. WikiLeaks is just one piece of that larger movement. Were Julian Assange and WikiLeaks to somehow disappear tomorrow--and I don't doubt that many powerful people wish that could somehow happen--nothing much would have changed.

An old way of doing things is dying; a new one is being born. And we need more midwives.

What is new is our ability to individually and together connect with greater ease than at any time in human history. As a result, information flows more freely into the public arena, powered by seemingly unstoppable networks of people around the world cooperating to share vital data and prevent its suppression. Old institutions and incumbent powers are inexorably coming to terms with this new reality. The "Age of Transparency" is here: not because one transnational online network dedicated to open information and whistle-blowing named WikiLeaks exists, but because the knowledge of how to build and maintain such networks is now widespread.

It both helps and hurts that we are living in a time of radical uncertainty about the "official" version of the truth. All kinds of "authoritative" claims made by leading public figures in recent years have turned out to be little more than thin air. There were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Deregulation of Wall Street didn't make the financial marketplace more rational. The American housing market turned out to be built on sand. The extent of Federal Reserve subsidies to the financial sector during the 2008-09 market collapse turned out to be much larger than was originally disclosed. The dikes of New Orleans weren't built to withstand a major hurricane. The Catholic Church child-molestation scandals turned out to be more widespread than church officials claimed. The oil wells in the Gulf weren't safe as promised and ratified by government inspectors. (And the claim that no one imagined that any of these things could go wrong and no one tried to warn us in advance? Also false.)

Even on smaller issues, the "authorities" often turn out to be the last to know what is actually going on, especially now that we all use the real-time web to share what we know as events unfold. Nothing less than absolute transparency for powerful actors seems to be the remedy to this state of affairs, the only way to restore trust in public institutions. And yet we also know we cannot eliminate all secrets, nor live in a world where privacy and confidentiality no longer exist.

WikiLeaks is just one piece of a much larger continuum of changes in how the people and the powerful relate to each other in this new time--changes that are fundamentally healthy for the growth and strength of an open society. Secrecy and the hoarding of information are ending; openness and the sharing of information are coming.

As I write these words, we seem to have reached a hinge moment in that cleansing process, which now stretches from the secret ledgers of the Federal Reserve and the hidden dealings of the U.S. State Department to the streets of the Middle East. America's leaders, some of them advocates for greater transparency in government at home and abroad, seem shocked that an outside force is doing to them what they have long called on democracy activists in other countries to do to their governments. Other political figures haven't even tried to balance open government with their knee-jerk attacks on WikiLeaks and calls for Assange's imprisonment or assassination. Dangerous legal precedents may soon be created that undermine the long-standing freedom of the press to report the truth.

American technology companies seem mostly cowed by the furious blasts emanating from Washington and uncertain of their own commitment to defend free speech online. While some tech visionaries are speaking out, others have been disturbingly quiet about the willingness of large chunks of their industry to cave in so quickly to political pressure. And American democracy activists seem divided between those who want to fight with extralegal methods like distributed-denial-of-service attacks to defend the wide-open web, those who fear engendering an anti-WikiLeaks backlash (or distrust Assange personally and fear being tied to his mast), and those like me who are resolutely anti-anti-WikiLeaks, and worry that the "cure" to WikiLeaks' independence will be worse than the disease.

But here's why the anti-WikiLeaks backlash is futile. The transparency movement is not going away.

Today, the wall between powerful elected officials and the people they want to represent has started to come down. In America, political campaigns at every level make strenuous efforts to engage in direct and open dialogue with their supporters. They hold special conference calls for political bloggers, they do live chats on Facebook, they respond to direct questions on Twitter, and they engage in video question-and-answer forums on YouTube. Much of this interactivity is aimed at showing that the candidate is "listening to the public" in the same way that a photo-op supposedly shows that a candidate cares about some issue, but sometimes they even give supporters tools to organize themselves on behalf of the campaign and invite them to help shape their agenda. This behavior has become so commonplace in politics that we've forgotten how big a cultural shift it represents.

The change isn't only coming from campaigns and other organizations or figures opening themselves up from the top down. It's also being created from the bottom up, as we literally carry in our pockets and on our laps the ability to connect and collaborate directly with each other, without requiring permission from the people formerly known as the authorities. And when you combine connectivity with transparency--the ability for more people to see, share, and shape what is going on around them--the result is a huge increase in social energy, which is being channeled in all kinds of directions.

Transparency is the fuel; connectivity is the engine; a sense of oneself as a more effective participant in the democratic process ([personal democracy](#), if you will) is the journey. What is emerging was a greatly expanded notion of the role of citizen not just as a passive consumer of political information and occasional voter, but as an active player, monitoring what government and politicians were doing, demanding a seat at the table and a view of the proceedings, sharing self-generated news of what was important, and participating in problem solving.

The fundamental change powering this networked age of politics is the shift from scarcity to abundance. Thanks to the rapid evolution of computer processing power, all kinds of goods that were once expensive to produce have become cheap. Beyond the declining price of a personal computer or a backup drive, elemental changes in the economics of information, connectivity, and time have occurred.

Social sharing of data--be it MP3 files or once-secret government documents--is out of anyone's control once the material is in digital form. And anyone who wants to form an association of like-minded souls can do so in seconds, using search tools, social networks, or just plain old email. And while there is still a limit to how many genuine connections one individual can have with others, there is no inherent limit to the number of connections that a community may create laterally. A "one-to-many" email list or social following may look valuable, but no one person can have millions of personal relationships. Thus, while leaders and celebrities remain important, their stars are dimming, as community hubs, forums, and aggregators that knit together thousands or even hundreds of thousands of people are steadily growing. Finally, as the price of memory and

disk space has continued to collapse, our ability to share time-intensive and content-rich resources has exploded. While old media like television, radio, and print have inherent physical limits on how much space or time than can give to any subject, on the Internet there are no such limits. The sound bite can be replaced with a sound blast, and if your content is compelling, people will share it for you.

The explosion of capacity means that old practices of hoarding or hiding information, done sometimes for pragmatic reasons (it was too costly to make lots of copies) and other times to maintain a position of privilege, now seem like artificial barriers to access. In this new context, a political campaign that refuses to engage supporters in an interactive manner is now seen as overly controlling. A legislature that makes public documents available solely by printing them in binders and making people come to a basement office in the Capitol, rather than posting them online in searchable, downloadable form, is seen as being ridiculously secretive. Charging exorbitant fees to access public information, or preventing people from contributing their own knowledge, is seen as hopelessly behind the times. And a government body that monopolizes control of public data not only risks undermining trust in its actions. It also stands to lose out in the burgeoning new world of participatory democracy known as "[we-government](#)," where citizens are using connective technologies and public data to create whole new ways of identifying and solving civic problems.

WikiLeaks has to be understood in this context. Let's posit that what Julian Assange is doing is "radical transparency," i.e., publishing everything he can get his hands on. He has not, in fact, been doing that, though he is obviously publishing a great deal of raw material. Given that the Internet is a realm of abundance--not scarcity like the old ink-based and airtime-based media--this is a feature, not a bug. Raw data dumps of previously private or secret information are now part of the media landscape. As Max Frankel, former executive editor of The New York Times, recently put it, "The threat of massive leaks will persist so long as there are massive secrets."

Security expert Bruce Schneier makes a similar point. "Secrets are only as secure as the least trusted person who knows them," he wrote on his blog a few weeks after Cablegate started. "The more people who know a secret, the more likely it is to be made public." Somewhere between 500,000 and 600,000 military and diplomatic personnel had access to the SIPRNet system that Manning tapped. The government actually doesn't know precisely how many people overall have security clearances to access classified information. Based on reporting from the Government Accountability Office, Steven Aftergood, a secrecy expert, estimates the number is 2.5 million people. Given that WikiLeaks' kind of "radical transparency" is technologically feasible, like it or not, it is now a given of our times. Efforts to stop it will fail, just as efforts to stop file-sharing by killing Napster failed.

It should go without saying that transparency does not mean exposing everyone's secrets to public view. But given how much our privacy is already being eroded, not just by government but also by private corporations, it's an understandable concern. It is striking to see how often people react to the news about WikiLeaks by asking how they could possibly do their jobs if every confidential conversation or negotiation were required to be public. But the transparency movement isn't aimed at exposing the doings of ordinary people to intense scrutiny, and the kind of network effects that occur around instances of information censorship generally don't happen around spreading someone's shopping list.

As Julian Assange argued as recently as the middle of January 2011, "Transparency should be proportional to the power that one has. The more power one has, the greater the dangers generated by that power, and the more need for transparency. Conversely, the weaker one is, the more danger there is in being transparent." In other words, if information is power, then what the transparency movement is trying to do is correct an

asymmetric power relationship.

This can be a messy process, and both the holders and the sharers of previously secret or hidden information need to act with care. I have a vivid memory of being accosted at some organization's annual dinner by the chief of staff of a liberal Member of Congress furious that her personal financial disclosure statement, which not only listed her salary but her bank and IRA account records and home address, had been put online at a site called Legistorm. Even though these disclosures had always been "public" in the sense of being available for viewing in a basement office in the Capitol, this felt different to her. Redaction of private details that have no reason to be in public view is a vital part of responsible transparency efforts.

But it is critical to recognize that transparency is a necessary corrective to excessive government power. What leading U.S. transparency organizations like the [Sunlight Foundation](#) (where I am a senior advisor) are pressing for is not the power to be Big Brother, watching everyone from above, but rather a flock of Little Sisters, watching government from below. All that the WikiLeaks phenomenon adds to that effort is the ability to share information beyond the control of any one government's laws limiting that effort.