



## WikiLeaks and the Critique of the Political Economy

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### **Karl Marx and the Political Economy of the Media and Communication**

In his seminal introduction to the field, Vincent Mosco defines the political economy of communication as the “study of the social relations, particularly the power relations that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources” (Mosco, 2009, pp. 2). Terms that have been used for naming this field have been “political economy of communication” (Mosco, 2009), “political economy of communications” (Wasko, 2004; Wasko, Murdock, & Sousa, 2011), “political economy of culture” (Calabrese & Sparks, 2004), “political economy of information” (Garnham, 2011; Mosco & Wasko, 1988), “political economy of mass communication” (Garnham, 1990), or “political economy of the media” (Golding & Murdock, 1997; McChesney, 2008).

Although the dominant outlook of this field is oriented on a critique and not an affirmation of both capitalism and the role of media, communication, information, and culture in capitalism, when naming the field, the term “critical,” “Marxist,” or “critique” is often not prefixed. Jonathan Hardy (2014) speaks in his introduction to the field of “critical political economy of the media” and includes under this term Marxist as well as other radical approaches, such as radical-democratic media studies that do not directly relate to Marx’s work. Nonetheless, Karl Marx can be considered as a founding and grounding figure of all modern critical thoughts, and as such, he cannot be ignored if one wants to understand the media today (Fuchs, 2011; Fuchs & Mosco, 2012).

Political economy is a broad field, incorporating also traditions of thinking grounded in classical liberal economic thought and thinkers like Malthus, Mill, Petty, Ricardo, Say, Smith, Ure, etc. that Marx studied, sublated, and was highly critical of in his works. His main point of criticism of political economy is that it fetishizes capitalism; its thinkers “confine themselves to systematizing in a pedantic way, and proclaiming for everlasting truths, the banal and complacent notions held by the bourgeois agents of production about their own world, which is to them the best possible one” (Marx, 1867, p. 175). They postulate that categories like commodities, money, exchange value, capital, markets, or competition are anthropological features of all society, thereby ignoring the categories’ historical character and enmeshment into class struggles. Marx showed the contradictions of political economy thought and took classical political economy as starting point for a critique of capitalism that considers “every historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion” and analyses how “the movement of capitalist society

is full of contradictions" (ibid., p. 103), which calls for the "development of the contradictions of a given historical form" by political practice (ibid., p. 619) and means that Marx's approach is "in its very essence critical and revolutionary" (ibid., p. 103).

Marx developed a critique of the political economy of capitalism, which means that it is: a) an analysis and critique of capitalism; b) a critique of liberal ideology, thought, and academia; and c) transformative practice.

To be precise, one should speak of the *Critique of the Political Economy of Communication, Culture, Information and the Media*. Some authors realized this circumstance and stressed that a "Marxist theory of communication" (Smythe, 1994, p. 258) is needed, that critical theory means "Marxist or quasi-Marxist" theory (ibid., p. 256), and that "Critical Political Economy of Communications" is critical in the sense of being "broadly marxisant" (Murdock & Golding, 2005, p. 61). The dominant strand of the Anglo-American version of the political economy of communication, culture, information, and the media is certainly critical political economy. It is mainly conducting conceptually grounded empirical case studies and engaging in unsystematic critical conceptualizing, which means that it lacks a systematic critical theory of capitalism and a grounding in dialectical philosophy as its foundation. It has thus far hardly systematically engaged with Marx's works, which led Robert McChesney to conclude that there is a lack of reading "Marx systematically to tease out the notion of communication in its varied manifestation" (McChesney, 2007, pp. 235–236). Karl Marx is the blind spot of the (critique of the) political economy of communication, culture, information, and media. The globalization of capitalism, its new global crisis, the new imperialism, and the role of knowledge and communication in capitalism (anticipated by Marx's notions of the means of communication and the "general intellect") has resulted in a renewed interest in Marx that should also be practiced in media and communication studies (Fuchs, 2011).

In the German context, authors have spoken of a critique of the political economy of communication (see, e.g., Holzer, 1973, 1994; Knoche, 2005). The problem is that these approaches, due to limited language capacities and limited resources, have hardly been translated into English, which has left their impact limited to national levels and resulted in a lack of international diffusion. At the national level, structures of intellectual oppression have furthermore resulted in a structural discrimination of the critique of the political economy of communication (Fuchs, 2014a). Horst Holzer (1994), who faced repression and lost his professorial job because of his political conviction as communist (Fuchs, 2014a), spoke of Marxian analysis as the forgotten theory of communication in the German world (Holzer, 1994).

Holzer (1973, p. 131; 1994) and Knoche (2005) distinguish four functions of the media in capitalism:

1. capital accumulation in the media industry;
2. advertising, publication relations, and sales promotion for other industries;
3. legitimization of domination and ideological manipulation; and
4. reproduction, regeneration, and qualification of labor power.

One can add elements to this approach so that the task for the *Critique of the Political Economy of Communication, Culture, Information and the Media* is to focus on the critique and analysis of the role of communication, culture, information, and the media in capitalism in the following contexts:

- a. processes of capital accumulation (including the analysis of capital, markets, commodity logic, competition, exchange value, the antagonisms of the mode of production, productive forces, crises, advertising, etc.);
- b. class relations (with a focus on work, labor, the mode of the exploitation of surplus value, etc.);
- c. domination in general; and
- e. ideology (both in academia and everyday life), as well as the analysis of and engagement in
- f. struggles against the dominant order, which includes the analysis and advancement of
- g. social movement struggles and
- h. social movement media that
- i. aim at the establishment of a democratic socialist society that is based on a communication commons as part of the structures of commonly-owned means of production (Fuchs, 2011).

The approach thereby realizes that, in capitalism, all forms of domination are connected to forms of exploitation (Fuchs, 2008, 2011).

Analyzing WikiLeaks from the perspective of the critique of the political economy must include the question of the potentials of WikiLeaks for fostering a critique of capitalism, as well as a grounding of this analysis in Marxist theory.

### **Liberalism and Socialism**

Reviewing classical and contemporary concepts of liberalism, Gaus and Courtland argue, in an encyclopaedic article about liberalism, that a common characteristic is that "liberals accord liberty primacy as a political value" (2011, para. 1). Liberalism differs in this respect from radical democracy/participatory democracy: "Radical democrats assert the overriding value of equality" (ibid., para. 48). In liberalism, "freedom is normatively basic, and so the onus of justification is on those who would limit freedom, especially through coercive means" (ibid., para. 2). The *fundamental liberal principle* is that "political authority and law must be justified, as they limit the liberty of citizens. Consequently, a central question of liberal political theory is whether political authority can be justified, and if so, how" (ibid.).

Freedom of speech, religious toleration extended to wide toleration of competing conceptions of the good life, antiestablishmentarianism (aimed at both religion and substantive views of human perfection), and a sphere of privacy are fundamental liberal commitments. Liberal public concerns focus on honoring these commitments but also on protecting fundamental civil interests, such as bodily integrity. Civil interests also include the maintenance of some sort of justified system of property rights. (Gaus, 1996, p. 175)

Socialists, in contrast to liberals, think that “the rewards of production . . . are due to society as a whole, and to its members equally, rather than to particular individuals” (Barker, 1991, p. 485). In the realm of property and labor, “means of production are commonly possessed” in a socialist society (ibid.). Important values in socialist thought include equality, communal and co-operative production, workers’ control of production/self-managed companies (ibid.), and sociopolitical solidarity (Buzby, 2010). Socialism maintains that the source of human value is human creativity and cooperation liberated from class power: “Socialist humanism declares: liberate men from slavery to things, to the pursuit of profit or servitude to ‘economic necessity’. Liberate man, as a creative being—and he will create, not only new values, but things in super-abundance” (Thompson, 1957).

The notion of socialism is not limited to the economic realm, although the economy is seen as an important foundation of society. Held writes that a key feature of participatory democracy is the “direct participation of citizens in the regulation of the key institutions of society, including the workplace and local community” (1996, p. 271). Participatory democracy, the political dimension of socialism, involves the “democratisation of authority structures” (Pateman, 1970, p. 35) in all decision-making systems, such as government, the workplace, the family, education, housing, etc. “If individuals are to exercise the maximum amount of control over their own lives and environment then authority structures in these areas must be so organised that they can participate in decision making” (ibid., p. 43). Participatory democracy theory uses a wide notion of the political that extends beyond the sphere of government into the economy and culture. “Spheres such as industry should be seen as political systems in their own right” (ibid.). So on the one hand, socialism in its economic dimension is a system “within which the means of production are socially owned,” and on the other hand, on in which, generally, the allocation and use of resources for different social purposes is accomplished through the exercise of what can be termed “social power,” which is “power rooted in the capacity to mobilize people for cooperative, voluntary collective actions of various sorts” (Wright, 2010, p. 121). Table 1 summarizes some main differences between liberalism and socialism.

**Table 1. Differences Between Liberalism and Socialism.**

	<b>Liberalism</b>	<b>Socialism</b>
Basic value	Freedom	Equality
View of society	Individualism	Sociality, solidarity
Economy	Private property	Collective ownership
Source of wealth	Capital	Cooperation of creative human beings freed from exploitation
State and politics	Private affairs are not controlled by the state	Grassroots democracy
Culture	Plurality of interests and worldviews	Universal rights and interests
Political struggle against:	Regulating state	Capital interests, exploitation, capitalist state, ideology

Marx's critique of liberal thought as ideological can be summarized in three points:

1. There is no pure individual existence. All human existence is socially conditioned. By conceiving society as based on individual action, liberalism fails to grasp the social existence of humans.

The real point is not that each individual's pursuit of his private interest promotes the totality of private interests, the general interest. One could just as well deduce from this abstract phrase that each individual reciprocally blocks the assertion of the others' interests, so that, instead of a general affirmation this war of all against all produces a general negation. The point is rather that private interest is itself already a socially determined interest, which can be achieved only within the conditions laid down by society and with the means provided by society; hence it is bound to the reproduction of these conditions and means. It is the interest of private persons; but its content, as well as the form and means of its realization, is given by social conditions independent of all. (Marx, 1857/1858, p. 156)

So it is Marx's argument that the notion of the individual in classical political economy is individualistic and neglects that all individual actions take place within, and are conditioned by, society. It also ignores the dialectic of individuals and society: "Just as society itself produces man as man, so is society produced by him" (Marx, 1844, p. 104).

2. The individualism advanced by liberal theories, thought, and political practice results in egoism that harms the public good.

Marx stresses that modern society is not only based on individualism, but also on egoism (1843b, pp. 235–237, 240). Liberty in bourgeois society "is the liberty of man viewed as an isolated monad, withdrawn into himself. . . . The practical application of the right of liberty is the right of private property" (ibid., p. 235). Modern society's constitution would be the "constitution of private property" (1843a, p. 166). The right of private property in the means of production and to accumulate as much capital as one pleases would harm the community and the social welfare of others, who are by this process deprived of wealth: "The right of property is thus the right to enjoy and dispose one's possessions as one wills, without regard for other men and independently of society. It is the right of self-interest" (1843b, p. 236). Marx further criticizes that the private accumulation of capital results in the concentration of capital and thereby of wealth: "Accumulation, where private property prevails, is the concentration of capital in the hands of a few" (1844, p. 41).

3. Liberalism is the ideological foundation of the modern class structure.

Marx says that capitalism's "principle of individualism" and a constitution of state and society that guarantees the existence of classes is the attempt "to plunge man back into the limitations of his private sphere" (1843a, p. 147), and to thereby make him a "private human being" (ibid., p.

148) that bases his existence on private property. "Private property, as the antithesis to social, collective property, exists only where the means of labour and the external conditions of labour belong to private individuals" (1867, p. 927).

The alternative to a capitalist society that is based on liberal principles of organizing the economy is a socialist democracy, in which:

- a. cooperative labor is the foundation of production;
- b. means of production and life are controlled commonly by the producers and citizens (which means that grassroots democracy is for Marx a way of organizing not only the economy, but also politics and all of society); and
- c. the mode of existence enables a post-scarcity society and the emergence of well-rounded, multifaceted individuals (for a detailed discussion, see Fuchs, 2011, chapter 9).

### **WikiLeaks: Liberalism or Socialism?**

The circumstance that WikiLeaks has become a subject of world politics has led some academics, such as Yochai Benkler (2011) and Manuel Castells (2010), who are two of the primary techno-optimistic Internet scholars, to make in a techno-euphoric manner claims about the political power of the Internet and social media. Such analyses lack a critical discussion of WikiLeaks' connection to liberalism, capitalism, and their antidote—socialism.

How does WikiLeaks relate to political worldviews? For answering this question, it is best to analyze WikiLeaks' self-description. Until December 3, 2010, WikiLeaks was accessible on the website [wikileaks.org](http://wikileaks.org). On the same day, the domain service provider EveryDNS cancelled WikiLeaks' URL. With the help of the Pirate Party Switzerland, WikiLeaks moved its official site to [wikileaks.ch](http://wikileaks.ch). The old and the new site have different mission statements ([wikileaks.org](http://wikileaks.org): WikiLeaks, 2010; [wikileaks.ch](http://wikileaks.ch): WikiLeaks, 2011<sup>1</sup>). I numbered each paragraph in the two WikiLeaks' self-definitions. For each paragraph, I have classified which topics are discussed, resulting in a category system consisting of seven topics. Table 2 shows the total number of occurrences of each topic in the two documents and the corresponding paragraph numbers.

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<sup>1</sup> The 2011 "About" section of the WikiLeaks homepage was also unchanged in April 2014, when this article was updated. The version on [wikileaks.org](http://wikileaks.org) (the official site of WikiLeaks at the time in 2014 when I finalized this article: <https://wikileaks.org/About.html>) says that the self-description went online "2011-05-7."

**Table 2. Results of a Quantitative Analysis of Topics Occurring in WikiLeaks' Two Self-Understandings (Data sources: WikiLeaks, 2010, 2011).**

Category	Total number (paragraphs in WikiLeaks' first self-definition)	Total number (paragraphs in WikiLeaks' second self-definition)
Whistleblowing, leaking documents	10 (1, 11, 12, 30, 36, 37, 42, 45, 46, 47)	6 (5, 6, 13, 22, 28, 32)
Making government transparent, watching governments, open government	22 (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 28, 29, 55, 56, 60)	16 (8, 9, 10, 11, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 29, 30, 31, 33, 37, 44, 45)
Explanation of technology	8 (10, 33, 38, 39, 40, 41, 43, 44)	2 (2, 17)
Making corporate power transparent	11 (13, 15, 16, 17, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27)	11 (8, 11, 30, 31, 33, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43)
Free speech	10 (19, 20, 31, 32, 34, 35, 43, 49, 50, 51)	10 (3, 7, 18, 19, 20, 21, 32, 34, 35, 36)
Journalism	3 (48, 52, 53)	7 (1, 4, 8, 12, 13, 14, 16)
WikiLeaks organization	6 (54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 59)	3 (2, 9, 15)

The analysis shows that the most important element in both self-definitions of WikiLeaks is that it wants, by leaking official documents, to make government power transparent, to watch governments, and to advance the establishment of open governments. Making corporate power visible is a secondary topic; there are only 11 paragraphs that discuss this topic in both of WikiLeaks' self-definitions, as opposed to 22 and 16 paragraphs, respectively, that discuss government transparency. In the first self-definition, the word "government" is mentioned 41 times; in the second, it is mentioned 36 times (2010, 2011). In the first document, the terms "company" or "companies" are mentioned one time; in the second, three times. The terms "corporate" or "corporation(s)" are mentioned 17 times in the first document and 21 times in the second (*ibid.*). WikiLeaks (2011, para. 22) provides a list of its most important leaks: 29 (63%) leaks concern governments, 13 (28%) concern companies and banks, and four (9%) concern religion. This circumstance confirms that WikiLeaks gives more weight to politics than to critique of the political economy and ideology critique.

WikiLeaks defines itself, in its first self-definition, first of all as a liberal project that protects freedom of speech and tries to strengthen democracy by making government corruption visible. In the second paragraph of the first self-definition, WikiLeaks defines itself purely in relation to government leaking, not corporate leaking: "We believe that transparency in government activities leads to reduced corruption, better government and stronger democracies" (2010, para. 2). WikiLeaks defines itself as "a global group of people with long standing dedication to the idea of improved transparency in institutions, especially government" (*ibid.*, para. 55). It puts an emphasis on governments. The problem of WikiLeaks' identity is the strong focus on documenting government corruption, whereas documenting corporate

irresponsibility and corporate crimes seems to be a subordinated goal. This creates the impression that corrupt governments are the main problem of our world, and that corrupt, exploitative, and criminal corporations are less problematic.

WikiLeaks' self-definition has a liberal bias because it sees big governments as the main problem, which reflects the liberal tendency to never trust governments and has a strong focus on the liberal core values of freedom (WikiLeaks is defined as a freedom of speech and freedom of information project) and information plurality.

WikiLeaks mentions as one of its goals the promotion of "good governance": "Open government answers injustice rather than causing it. Open government exposes and undoes corruption. Open governance is the most effective method of promoting good governance" (2010, para. 13). The concept of "good governance" has been employed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to describing conditions that indebted and poor countries must fulfill in order to get an IMF loan. These conditions include on the one hand the commitment of the debtor countries to fight corruption, and on the other hand "improving the management of public resources through reforms covering public sector institutions" and "supporting the development and maintenance of a transparent and stable economic and regulatory environment conducive to efficient private sector activities" (IMF, 1997). The consequences of such austerity measures could be observed in Greece in 2010–2011: increasing unemployment, wage cuts, and cuts in public services that impact the quality of life of the masses. The concept of good governance is an expression of neoliberal international politics that aim at deregulating, liberalizing, and privatizing the public sector, cutting state budgets for education, welfare, social security, and health care in poor countries, and opening investment opportunities for Western companies that transfer wealth and profit created in poor countries back to the West. David Harvey gives examples of how IMF austerity programs have resulted in the increase of poverty and inequality and argues that the management and manipulation of crises by the IMF and other institutions results in the "deliberative redistribution of wealth from poor countries to the rich" (2007, p. 162) and is an expression of neoliberal accumulation by dispossession. Good governance is a measure for orienting the state on "conditions for economic expansion" (Jessop, 2002, p. 267). Given the fact that WikiLeaks is, to a certain degree, concerned about the negative effects of corporate power (2010, para. 22–27; 2011, para. 29–43), it is surprising and self-contradictory that it employs the neoliberally connoted notion of "good governance" in its self-definition.

WikiLeaks does not ignore the importance of criticizing and watching corporate power in its mission statements, but it does subordinate it to government watching. Corporate power is frequently relegated to one form of corruption among others: "WikiLeaks may be at the heart of another global revolution—in better accountability by governments and other institutions" (2010, para. 60). Leaking affects "authoritarian governments, oppressive institutions and corrupt corporations" (2010, para. 17; 2011, para. 33). One can observe here not only that governments are always mentioned first, but also a strange separation that implies that corporations are not necessarily oppressive institutions, but only in those cases where they are corrupt.

The problem of WikiLeaks' self-understanding is that it idealizes the freedom of speech and information and liberal values, and separates corporate domination from state domination. The very liberal

values that WikiLeaks embraces (freedom of speech, freedom from government intervention, freedom of information) have never been realized in modern society, because markets and capitalism privilege corporations that tend to dominate public expression and opinion by privately controlling large parts of the means of expression, information, and speech. Liberal values are their own immanent critique, because they have never been realized in capitalism and are contradicted by liberalism's emphasis on private property rights.

WikiLeaks criticizes that large corporations have tremendous economic and political power. It makes 11 points about what is problematic about corporate power (2010, para. 24; 2011, para. 40). These points can be summarized as focusing on the following topics: corporations have centralized decision-making power, they provide no civil rights for employees (no freedom of speech and association, human rights are limited, no privacy, permanent surveillance), and their economies are centrally planned. These are good points that are certainly elements of a socialist worldview, but one important criticism of corporations is missing: that they are centrally owned by a class of private owners that exploits the labor power of workers and employees in order to accumulate profit that becomes the private property of the owner class. Questions concerning class and exploitation are left out. One gets the impression that WikiLeaks sees companies as just another form of oppressive government and reduces corporations to government mechanisms. The difference, however, is that companies not only oppress, but in contrast to governments, they also have the general feature of exploiting labor power.

Another problem is the assumption that it is possible to civilize corporations: "WikiLeaks endeavors to civilize corporations by exposing uncivil plans and behavior. Just like a country, a corrupt or unethical corporation is a menace to all inside and outside it" (2010, para. 27). "Corporations will behave more ethically if the world is watching closely" (2011, para. 43). One can hear daily stories about corporate irresponsibility. Stories such as the one that BP caused one of the worst ecological disasters ever are in all news outlets, as well as that iPods and iPads are produced in China under inhumane conditions by workers who commit suicide because they cannot stand the working conditions, etc. These are always in the media; there are daily stories about child labor, precarious labor conditions, etc. The problem is that such a multitude of stories, and WikiLeaks here is no exception and directly admits this in its self-description, makes us believe that corporate irresponsibility and corporate crimes against humanity are the exception from the rule (hence, they are newsworthy), and can therefore be fixed within capitalism by "civilizing corporations." But what if corporations are uncivilized as such, if their behavior is always exploitative and irresponsible? Then capitalism and corporations cannot be civilized and made ethical, and exposing uncivil plans and behavior should be aimed at transforming and democratizing the whole. What is a corporation? A machine-like organization that accumulates capital by exploiting workers who create surplus value that is transformed into profit. Exploitation is always uncivilized, and it degrades humans to an inhumane status. Therefore, corporations cannot be civilized and can never act ethically. In order to civilize society, corporatism and all other forms of domination need to be abolished. In its new mission statement, WikiLeaks (2011) abolished the passage about civilizing corporations, which could be an indication that it, to a certain degree, has changed its political assessment of capitalism.

WikiLeaks has some parallels with corporate watch platforms (such as CorpWatch Reporting, Transnationale Ethical Rating, The Corporate Watch Project, Multinational Monitor). All of these have in

common that they are Internet projects that try to make powerful structures transparent as part of the struggle against powerful institutions. The Internet provides means for documenting such behavior. It can help to watch the watchers and to raise public awareness. WikiLeaks can be seen as an alternative media project: It tries to provide information that uncovers the misuse of power by powerful actors, and it is an Internet-based medium that enables critiques of power structures. It is, however, thus far only a critical alternative media project to a limited extent (for this concept, see Fuchs, 2011; Sandoval, 2009; Sandoval & Fuchs, 2010), because it seems to aim at reforming and not abolishing structures of exploitation and domination, underestimating the exploitative character of corporate power and therefore falling short of aiming at the categorical imperative of criticism to help humans to overthrow all relations that alienate them from their human essence by exploiting and oppressing them. WikiLeaks does, however, have potential to be not only an alternative medium that watches power abuse, but a critical medium that helps and aims at overcoming structures of domination and exploitation. This requires overcoming its liberal bias by changing its self-understanding and engaging more in the practice of corporate watching that is currently being subordinated to government watching.

At the same time as WikiLeaks' is predominantly a liberal project, this liberal practice poses a threat to the capitalist corporate-military-government complex and constitutes an immanent critique of the contradictions of capitalism. WikiLeaks' practice, to a certain degree, questions liberal institutions that per-se result in domination, exploitation, and the abuse of power.

There has been, from the outset, something about its activities that goes way beyond liberal conceptions of the free flow of information. . . . The aim of the WikiLeaks revelations was not just to embarrass those in power but to lead us to mobilise ourselves to bring about a different functioning of power that might reach beyond the limits of representative democracy. . . . This is precisely our situation today: we face the shameless cynicism of a global order whose agents only imagine that they believe in their ideas of democracy, human rights and so on. Through actions like the WikiLeaks disclosures, the shame—our shame for tolerating such power over us—is made more shameful by being publicized. (Žižek, 2011, para. 7, 13 )

The positive potential of WikiLeaks is that it could transcend its own values and realize its potential for becoming a critical, socialist watchdog medium. Socialist watchdog projects are not ends in themselves, but rather, self-defense mechanisms in social struggles that aim at the establishment of participatory democracy.

### Conclusion

WikiLeaks has depended on large mass media like *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *Der Spiegel* for reaching the public (Christensen, 2010). An alternative medium like WikiLeaks is less likely to be recognized, read, and mastered by everyday citizens. It is no surprise, but rather a reflection of the political economy of the media in capitalism, that on the one hand, *The New York Times* is ranked #121 in the list of the world's most accessed websites, *The Guardian* #146, and *Der Spiegel* Online #177, while on the other hand, WikiLeaks is much less accessed and known, ranking only #12,267 (data source:

alexa.com, accessed on April 13, 2014). The power of mainstream media is not to be cheered, but should rather make us worry. Mainstream media are prone to pressures by advertisers, companies, lobbyists, and governments that can result in filtered, censored news that is uncritical and excludes critical voices. It is desirable that alternative media like WikiLeaks should not have to rely on corporate channels in order to reach the public, but have the power and visibility to directly reach a mass public.

Bendetta Brevini and Graham Murdock (2013) argue that there are multiple forms of economic censorship of WikiLeaks, including the cancellation of the provision of server space and domain names, software services, the disabling of bank accounts and donations via bank transfers and credit cards, as well as that the labor required for organizing and maintaining WikiLeaks was constrained by the diminishing donations, and the analytical labor needed for analyzing leaked documents had to be outsourced to mainstream media organizations.

Alternative movements, groups, and individuals, such as Anonymous, WikiLeaks, Edward Snowden, Pirate Parties, privacy advocates, media reform movements, the free software and open access movement, hacker groups, data protection organizations, consumer protection organizations, state and corporate watchdog organizations, and human rights activists, collectively point out the limits of the classical liberal conception of the public sphere: The actual practices of data commodification, corporate media control, and corporate and state surveillance limit the liberal freedoms of thought, opinion, expression, assembly, and association. These movements and groups are the negative dialectic of the enlightenment of 21st-century informational capitalism. They show the difference between the proclaimed essence and the actual existence of liberalism. The aforementioned actors conduct a practical immanent political critique of liberalism. They, however, frequently miss taking this form of critique to the next step and advancing from immanent critique toward a transcendental critique that sees the limits of the realization of liberal values and calls for the establishment of a participatory democracy. The freedoms that reality today negates can only be realized in a society of equals, a participatory democracy.

Radical social movements, such as the Occupy movement, go one step further and do not simply demand privacy rights for citizens or freedom of speech, but rather, they also stress that socioeconomic inequality, the contradiction between the 99% and the 1%, limits freedom. Occupy calls for the realization of social rights together with individual rights in a realm of social and individual freedom that can best be described as participatory democracy.

The unequal media and communication power structures characteristic of the capitalist media system make this difficult and thereby create the risk that leaked documents published by WikiLeaks will be censored, distorted, or ignored. Changing this situation will require a struggle to give more economic, political, and attention power to alternative media. The economic, political, and ideological repressions that WikiLeaks faces are characteristic of the facts that freedom of the media and information does not and cannot exist in capitalism (Fuchs, 2014b), and that progressive struggles have to be directed against capitalism and power asymmetries.

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