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WikiLeaks and the construction of gender by the media

ICT AND GENDER

In the 1980s, cyberfeminists developed the utopia of a domination-free and gender-free area of cyberspace. Donna Haraway (1985) is regarded as one of its most important representatives. The (female) cyborg – as a hybrid figure of thought – was conceived as a merger between women and computers that could undermine and potentially resolve the prevailing dual concepts of masculinity and femininity, organism and technology, public and private spheres, and so on. A quarter-century later, we see not only how the Internet has made these utopias a distant memory, but also how the mainstream media are involved in maintaining dual gender hierarchies with respect to the Internet. This can be observed particularly clearly in the development of WikiLeaks.

In 2010, the disclosure platform WikiLeaks held the international community in suspense. No mainstream media outlet could ignore the discussion of the documents WikiLeaks had released on its Internet platform. The first publication that received notice by the media was in 2007 and from this point on, WikiLeaks managed to achieve a constant increase in effecting the mainstream media. This amazing growth took an abrupt turn starting in the autumn and winter of 2010, as mainstream media interest was no longer driven by the secret documents WikiLeaks had published, but by the private sphere of WikiLeaks spokesman, Julian Assange.

1. The analysis is based on the author's observation of leading Austrian and German, mainly, newspapers and news magazines from 2009 to 2011. Internet platforms were also taken into consideration. Yet, a systematic content analysis has to be undertaken. This commentary is, in effect, the primary results of closed observations on the coverage of WikiLeaks.

The height of the success of WikiLeaks is, at the same time, also a culmination point in which the various discourses cross and produce transparency in their 'loquacity' (Foucault 1977). Long before the public debate over WikiLeaks had reached this culmination point in its thematic turn, the mainstream media had already set a course towards the construction of conservative gender stereotypes. WikiLeaks is construed, I would argue, as a place of exclusive masculinity; therefore, the mainstream media fell back on traditional gender stereotypes. The construction of masculinity appeals to those conservative gender attributes that associate masculinity with technology, hackerdom, the military, intelligence, power and fighting.¹

Take for example the mainstream media's situating of WikiLeaks in the context of male-coded hackerdom, which is tantamount to a 're-articulation' (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Hall 1996) of every dominant technology discourse that was circulated in the early years of the Internet. It is precisely this myth linking the Internet to male-coded technology that Haraway (1985) rails against in her 'Manifesto for Cyborgs'. But the sensual boundary shifts that Donna Haraway demands, as well as the appropriation of cyberspace as a feminine space as proposed by Sadie Plant (1997), are counter-discourses that frustrate the dominant technology discourse, and have not been taken up by the mainstream media.

The other connections produced by the mainstream media point to an almost radical gender segregation, which knows only the space of masculinity and precludes femininity. The WikiLeaks activists are 'truth hackers', as *Zeit Online* (N.N. 2009) labelled them; they are 'technically savvy', a 'lone fighter against the injustice of the world'; they devote themselves to the 'struggle against the military-industrial Complex', as the authors of the German news magazine *Der Spiegel* formulated (Rosbach and Stark 2011).

The mainstream media do not put WikiLeaks into the context of other counter-hegemonic social movements. The political activism of WikiLeaks is isolated, and this can have an effect that makes it look as if WikiLeaks functions entirely without women. This omission enables the mainstream media to reinforce the construction of WikiLeaks as a space of masculinity. Even the experts on WikiLeaks interviewed by the media are predominantly male. This media construction creates the best conditions for setting critical social movements in conflict with one another. How can an almost uncontrollable attack on the most powerful governments and corporations in the world be silenced any more quickly in the media than through de-politicization, scandalization, sexualization, criminalization and the division of a counter-hegemonic political movement?

The main discourse in the media coverage of WikiLeaks initially focused on the dissemination of the secret documents WikiLeaks had released. The topics included the corruption of government officials, documents on various banks, a secret US-EU agreement on the transfer of banking data concerning the Church of Scientology and e-mail from scientists at the Climatic Research Unit at the University of East Anglia, as well as documents from the American intelligence services and the US military.

The media coverage followed two main lines: first, there was an intensification of the 'struggle between WikiLeaks and the American Empire' (Žižek 2011); then there was a de-politicization and tabloidization through the publication of embassy staff gossip and chit-chat. With this dichotomy of the 'struggle against the empire' on the one hand and gossip on the other, the original connection between WikiLeaks and masculinity was called

into question. The articulation of femininity and gossip, firmly rooted in social discourse, directly attacked the myth of the subversive masculinity of WikiLeaks. In this devaluation, which functions via the construction of the hierarchical gender dichotomy, all mainstream media took part.

Circulated to the same degree as the 'revelations' on the gossip level, the 'struggle against the empire' was also enriched through numerous facets: law, economics and cyber attacks became the most important aids. The search for a statutory basis for charges of misconduct, such as treason or terrorism, was accompanied by economic attacks and attacks on the platform itself. The struggle metaphor not only was applied to the struggle against the empire, but became even more comprehensive in its meaning and moved in the direction of a multi-front battle.

Secondary discourses, such as a public discussion on what significance WikiLeaks could have for the future of journalism, or which effects the publication of secret documents, could have, for the further development of a democratic social order, remained in the minority. The turning point in the coverage by the mainstream media came on 6 December 2010. Julian Assange was accused of sexual violence by the Swedish public prosecutor. Two Swedish feminist women claimed that Assange held one of them down and raped the other in her sleep. This involved a de-politicization and personalization of the reporting, which was now reduced to the private and intimate domain of the person of Julian Assange. The struggle was now personalized as well; no longer was the struggle of the WikiLeaks platform against a social discourse of power and the question of how power and balances of power work in a global society in the foreground, but rather the struggle of an individual concerning a personal, intimate affair.

The main discourse of the coverage functioned on the basis of the dichotomy of public sphere/politics versus private sphere/intimacy, together with its traditional, hierarchical attributions of masculinity and femininity. With the shift to the sphere of intimate domesticity and the mobilization of perpetrator–victim symbolism, the struggle metaphor took on a whole new meaning; it was no longer rooted in the level of international politics, but in the banality of everyday discourse.

Two important aspects can be observed following the turning point in the reporting by the mainstream media: first, there was no separation between WikiLeaks the platform and the person accused of sexual violence. These two levels were not kept apart, as is the practice with Wikipedia (2011a, 2011b). On the contrary, through this mixing of levels, the mainstream media forced a transfer of meaning of the negative image of a 'perpetrator' (who was only a defendant at this time) onto WikiLeaks. The most important effect of this discourse was that the coverage of the WikiLeaks platform – and with it, the beginnings of a discussion on the importance of WikiLeaks in a democracy – was stalled almost completely. Even the documents that had been published on the platform no longer received comparable attention or circulation in the international media.

Second, the perpetrator–victim discourse in the reporting (Which offenses had Assange committed? Who are the victims? What are the contents of the indictment?) mutated rapidly into an anti-feminist discourse. This manifested itself in the assertion that, given the worldwide significance of the 'struggle against the empire', such charges of rape and sexual violence were irrelevant or 'private affairs' and should not be settled in public, the accusers as well as the prosecuting attorneys were 'radical feminists', etc. In this discourse, the already 'damaged' masculinity was once again brought into position

2. Including Michael Moore, Naomi Klein and Naomi Wolf, among others.

against the devalued femininity, especially against feminism. The heated anti-feminist discourse – particularly in the German *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (22 December 2010), which quoted Assange as using the words ‘malicious radical feminist’ – quickly spread in the mainstream media and the blogosphere. The anti-feminist discourse construed Assange as the victim of a feminist conspiracy. Both the accusers and the prosecuting attorneys were branded as radical feminists. This anti-feminist media discourse also marked the beginning of a wider discussion within the feminist movement.

It is interesting that this conflict is only superficially about feminism and anti-feminism. These are practically just the subtext in the debate on WikiLeaks. The real effect of this media discussion is that social movements are divided and pitted against each other. This is evident with regard to not only the anti-feminist discourse in the mainstream media, but also the feminist discourse itself.

FEMINIST MEDIA DISCOURSES

The discussion within the feminist movement is controversial. It has been conducted primarily in women’s magazines and on blogs, but it has also reached the mainstream media. The feminist discourse – condensed and abstracted – can be characterized as follows:

- 1) The discourse on the trivialization of sexual violence used the reproach of instrumentalization as the main line of argument. Prominent supporters of Assange² were quoted as arguing that this accusation is analogous to the instrumentalization of veiled women in Afghanistan. To legitimize the US war in Afghanistan, women’s rights were employed/misused as defensible human rights. Comparably, the accusation of sexual violence was being instrumentalized to legitimize a judicial persecution. For the mainstream media, this argument is attractive, because one of the earliest concerns of the women’s movement – sexual, domestic violence – does not have to be discussed, but can be instrumentalized and, in this way, trivialized. In this respect, this argumentation is also attractive because it provides an anti-feminist subtext (Assange is the victim of not only a political persecution but also a feminist conspiracy).
- 2) The discourse on the thematization of sexual violence takes the issue seriously and even abstracts further from the initial case. Public discussion of the person Assange is used only as a starting point for the work of feminist consciousness raising in order to gain public attention. The current awareness potential for this issue is used, by means of a strategy of ‘joining’, to attach itself onto a public issue and focus attention on the feminist concerns over sexual violence more broadly. It is therefore mostly about raising awareness of sexual violence and the question of when a sexual behaviour constitutes rape (Democracy Now 2011). This includes the precise analysis of legislation concerning rape and sexual violence in different countries and the comparison of statistics on criminal proceedings relating to these crimes, such as what took place in the German feminist magazine *Emma* (14 January 2011). This feminist discourse is seen as entirely in the spirit of the second women’s movement, which had used the slogan ‘the personal is political’.
- 3) In addition to these two feminist discourses, there are several variants that can be described as mixed forms. They argue that the Assange case

would ordinarily be of little interest. What this case shows, however, is that crimes of sexual violence can be measured with different scales. Mass rape in war and severe forms of sexual crimes should receive similarly extensive media attention. Moreover, such crimes should attract an equally rapid and consistent international legal prosecution as this case has. These discourses are linked with the political demands that all rapes that take place in wars and insurrections must be pursued with equal clarity, speed and international engagement, both legally and in the media.

What is not found in the feminist discourse is a discussion about the hidden effects of the media coverage of the rape allegations. The feminist movement, like the transparency movement surrounding WikiLeaks, is a social movement that advocates a change in the frozen un/democratic structures of our society. Clearly the mainstream media play a decisive role in dividing and weakening social movements through excessive thematizing and by means of such classic news values as personalization, scandalization, sexualization in conjunction with androcentrism and the construction of stereotypical gender hierarchies. Moreover, the mainstream media succeed in normalizing every other such controversially led discussion in minority discourses to a traditional gender dichotomy.

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