

Víctor SAMPEDRO

El Cuarto Poder en Red. Por un periodismo (de código) libre

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The Networked Fourth Power. Towards an open-source (code) journalism constitutes an exercise of open-source code journalism in itself. Víctor Sampedro teaches, outrages and inspires throughout five chapters loaded with indisputable data. From the very beginning, the author lays all the cards on the table and shows the urgency, relevance and interest of the events he analyzes. This work is a logbook of a journalism that recovers communication as a common good and a statement about updating and restoring the source code of democracy.

The circular structure of the publication revolves around Wikileaks, the main case addressed in the book, and the courageous “Characters” who played a main role in the project: Julian Assange, Chelsea E. Manning and Edward J. Snowden, who are portrayed in all their complexity. This research presents Wikileaks as a prototype of postindustrial journalism, as a distributed Networked Fourth Power that acts as counter-power. Along this monograph, the author answers a series of questions on the causes that prevented Wikileaks from being the real revolution that it could have been, from having had a deeper effect on present-day politics and communications: What has remained in our collective memory about Wikileaks? How has it influenced society and journalism? Which different outcomes could it have had if the public, the governments and the media would have received and used their leaks differently?

One of the key answers to these questions highlights the hegemonic devices that tamed the sharp critique of the Wikileaks initiative and the way they disassembled the broad debate about press and politics that the leaked issues would have required. The author goes over the chronology of the events around Wikileaks and unfolds the complicated communicative mechanisms developed by the current hegemonic public sphere to discredit the creators of this communicative revolution. From the first chapter, this work analyzes Wikileaks as the roadmap that the current journalism (especially the mass media) has not been able, or has not wanted, to follow. However, Sampedro recriminates not only the role played by the media and the political and economic powers that manage them, but he also underlines the dangers of a global citizenship that suffers an economic, moral, and political “indigence” (p. 28). His proposals reclaim the responsibility of the audiences to empower themselves as political actors, to relinquish themselves of their “political ignorance” (p. 58), so that in they can identify this type of exceptional transformative opportunities towards social justice, towards “a de facto regime of transparency that would extinguish the ongoing wars by denying the lies that justify them” (p. 34).

The author revises the goals of Wikileaks, its successes, its effects, and its possibilities, along with its strategic contradictions and its theoretical limitations. In doing so, he reassesses the achievements of Wikileaks as a paradigm of scientific and hacker journalism, based on a universal, communal and disinterested “code”, accessible for everybody and replicable in different contexts. Nevertheless, Sampedro severely criticizes the fact that Assange’s initiative became an isolated and vain issue, mostly because the mass media were not able to reset their codes and corporatism. He condemns the media for not modifying their conception of the public as consumers of information instead of acknowledging them as a source of information. Sampedro endorses a collective journalism understood as a communicative cooperative work between professional journalists and other social actors, such as private and public media, non-profit organizations and foundations, research centers and, mainly, proactive communicative citizens and creators of resources, such as hacktivists (hackers).

This study rescues a data journalism, a citizen journalism, based on trusted networks that develop “a code to update and revitalize democracy” (p. 241). Inspired by the courage, creativity and reinvention that underlie Wikileaks, the author argues that this “revolution will not be a replacement” (title for chapter III). The effect of an “ice-breaker ship” of the communicative

model of Assange is a breath of fresh air for present-day journalism. It takes it back to its origins, to a “radical” journalism that returns to its “roots”, to its initial sense of service, in which citizens are collaborators and not intruders. Sampedro looks the current situation of the profession with independence and commitment and he claims for journalists who give transmedia visibility to the messages of their communities in order to foster social debate with institutional impact. The main argument is that the journalist “gets paid to construct public sphere”, to build “conditions and opportunities for debate, with data and arguments” (p. 31). Therein lies precisely the Networked Fourth Power: an “informative counter-power of a transnational civil society” (p. 188-189), a re-appropriation of the public sphere by citizens through a journalism that recognizes them “as political and communicative actors with full rights” (p. 23). A Networked Fourth Power provides digital citizens with the access to the mass media and it connects the information with the public debate through an advocacy of information used as a strategy for social change.

In conclusion, the book assesses “the journalism that Wikileaks came to reinvent” (p. 221). This open-source journalism monograph provides specific ways of action through a dialogic remix profoundly documented with the author’s entire research and professional trajectory, as well as with testimonies and life stories of hacktivists and with other artistic, research and journalistic discourses. The Networked Fourth Power is an exercise of coherence and citizen conviction, activist and mainly professional; a guide of research that convinces from its first lines due to its passion, sincerity and perspicacity. It is a brilliant sample of activist data journalism forged from and for nonviolence. This is not a book to be read just once. It is a toolbox full of data, good practices and proposals which will leave no one indifferent.

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