

Libraries
Media
► The Internet, Digital Media
Print Media
Radio and TV
Journalism
Kubus Cultural Videos
Panorama
Background
Links
Science and Education

Trends

"Disclosure portals have outlived their usefulness" – Assessments by David Schraven



How do Wikileaks and other disclosure portals influence journalism? Not in the least, says journalist David Schraven, who heads the research department of the media group West German Allgemeine Zeitung (WAZ). But they do point in the right direction.

Mr Schraven, when in mid-2010 Wikileaks published documents about the Afghanistan war, all we could see at the portal were excerpts. Selected media, however, were given access to all the data. How do you evaluate this cooperation?

It's right that the media accept such data. The cooperation shows that an unedited publication of raw documents, such as Wikileaks originally sought, doesn't work. Documents as such aren't able to tell a story; they give only hints for a story.

By seeking this collaboration, Wikileaks confirmed that in order to handle such leaks in a sensible way they need professional review and editing.

"Handle the data professionally"

Wikileaks boss Julian Assange has said in interviews that his job is to "coordinate" the media. Do such arrangements turn journalists into the mouthpiece for disclosure portals?

No, not at all. Assange's greatly overestimates his importance. The interaction with Assange is fine as long as the media get from him what they want. Let him say what he likes. He has no influence on the design of the stories.

That the media are willing to enter into agreements with him about when stories will be published is in their interest. They want to avoid competing against each other and to handle the data professionally.

A document isn't a story

Currently, Wikileaks evidently prefers publishing documents that hurt above all the United States. Might not the media be making themselves the tool of a deliberate information policy?

First of all, this is about journalists looking carefully at what sort of information they are receiving. And that is only a document, not a story. A document is a piece of paper. Then I, as a journalist, must bring this piece of paper to life by seeing whether it's accurate, what story lies behind it and what is context of the whole thing.

Then I have to take a story as it comes: you eat what you get served. Because Assange comes out with something about Afghanistan doesn't mean that another story, which is also interesting but about the German parliament, goes by the board. It will still get printed.

The investigative carrier pigeon



Who needs whom more: the disclosure portals the journalists or vice versa?

Journalists and the media don't need disclosure portals in the least. In the end this is about nothing more than a new form of the technical transfer of data. People act as if Wikileaks

invented investigative journalism. That's wrong. Media have been getting anonymous tips for decades, whether by post, by messenger or by carrier pigeon.

How have disclosure portals changed journalism?

I'd say not at all. They are merely another kind of post. What has changed, however, is the way in which we deal with the information we receive. This involves some very technical questions. For example, is an analysis of information that is supported by a database new? That doesn't have anything to do with disclosure portals, but with the altered conditions of data processing in the journalism.

What is new about these?

Before, when I condensed a thirty page paper into a story half a page long, the article was filed and the thirty pages disappeared into the archive. Everybody then forgot about it. Today the paper is put into a database and indexed. In this way I can get much more information out of old documents, which before I simply forgot about.

Creating one's own portal

At the end of January 2011, Openleaks was launched. The portal doesn't itself publish any data, but rather conveys them to partner organisations. They include, along with media, trade unions and environmental groups. Does this model mean more competition for journalism?



No, not at all. The idea that it does is, in my view, absolute bollocks. I can't imagine it will work. What medium would go along with it, for what reason? I think rather that organisations such as Greenpeace or media groups such as ours will create their own portals. Why should we pay someone for keeping open an electronic post box?

You're in charge of the file upload portal of the WAZ Media Group, which was opened at the end of 2010. What is the idea behind it?

It's a contact portal designed to facilitate access to us. It gives people the opportunity to get in touch directly with our research team – by post, fax, telephone and various e-mail options, including an anonymous file upload via secure lines. At the same time, we introduce ourselves: here are the people who are receiving your material and addressing it.

Publication with accompanying blog



What has been your experience so far with the WAZ Upload-Portal?

We've received a lot of material. Some people wrote to us openly, others sent material anonymously. We evaluated the information and much has already been included in stories – for example, very good stuff about the sale of Steag, Germany's fifth-largest producer of electricity.

We now have only to find a way to make more transparent how such information has entered into stories. I've recently been thinking about a blog. There we could show how the data has been translated into stories.

What will the relationship be between disclosure portals and investigative journalism in future: competition, division of labour or cooperation?

My long-term surmise is that all media groups will create their own upload possibilities – because they are really nothing more than an anonymous post box. The pure disclosure platforms have outlived their usefulness; they'll be important for only a few more years. They have provided a stimulus, and the media are now integrating it into their work.

Dominik Reinle conducted the interview. He has a degree in sociology and is a freelance journalist who writes for various publications, including the West German Radio. He lives in Cologne.

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*Any questions about this article? Please write to us!
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Related links

- [WikiLeaks – Herfried Münkler on State Secrets and their Disclosure \(goethe.de\)](#)
- [File upload of the portal of the WAZ Media Group](#)
- [Wikileaks](#)
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