

University of Canberra

Matthew Ricketson

Navigating the access swell, the independence shoals and the siren song of narrative: a comparison of the work of Bob Woodward, Mark Danner and WikiLeaks

Abstract:

Among the various thorny issues raised in researching and writing narrative nonfiction, the writer-source relationship and the balancing of narrative style with factual fidelity are two important ones. The stakes are raised for writers examining politics and war. The article explores these issues through discussion of two journalist-authors (Woodward and Danner) and an organisation (WikiLeaks) whose works illustrate different approaches. Each has something substantial to offer readers but each of their approaches raises different difficulties for both writer and reader. Access to important political actors can be undermined by restrictions on what can be written about them but distance from political actors may hinder the writer's ability to understand events and issues in their complexity. At the same time, for political events to be comprehensible and appealing to the average reader, accounts of them may benefit from being constructed in a narrative style, which in turn raises issues about the kind of narrative approach to be taken by the writer.

Biographical note:

Dr Matthew Ricketson is an academic and journalist. He was appointed inaugural professor of journalism at the University of Canberra in 2009. Before that he was Media and Communications editor for *The Age*. He ran the journalism program at RMIT for 11 years and has worked on staff at *The Australian* and *Time Australia*, among other publications. He is the author of two books – a biography of Australian author, Paul Jennings, and a journalism textbook – and editor of two – an anthology of profile articles and *Australian Journalism Today*. His next book, about narrative nonfiction, will be published by Allen and Unwin in 2014.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Nonfiction – Narrative nonfiction – Politics – 2003 Iraq war – Journalist-source relationships

The researching and writing of narrative nonfiction throws up thorny issues, from how writers balance gaining access to important sources of material while maintaining their editorial independence to how they make what they find in their researches into a narrative. There are of course other issues, such as what expectations readers have of works that read *like* a novel but are *not* a novel, and they are important. For this article, though, I will focus on the relationship writers form with their sources and the tension for writers between creating an absorbing narrative and a factually accurate one. Acknowledging that there is more to reality than facts and that the most nonfiction writers can hope to achieve is to arrive closer to the truth of an event or issue, there remains a tension for them between fidelity to representing events and people as they have found them, and the siren song of narrative. The writer of narrative nonfiction aims for a broad, even mass audience; if they didn't they would be producing textbooks or encyclopaedia entries. But when does the desire to create an engrossing narrative give way to the enticements of tidy plot resolutions and pleasing dramatic arcs?

If these questions and tensions exist in narrative nonfiction writing across its many sub-genres from true crime or travel writing, they take on a more urgent form for those writing about politics, especially when political leaders take their countries to war. Such work poses substantial difficulties for writers: how do they gain access to presidents or generals or intelligence chiefs? How do they gain access to official and private documents to verify and buttress their interview material? How likely is it that they will trade their editorial independence to secure the all-important access to primary source material? Further, politicians and their advisers wear what might be thought of as a third dan black belt in the verbal martial arts. Thinking about how the writer presents what they have found in their research, other questions arise. Can they reconstruct highly charged and contested events they did not witness for themselves into the scene by scene narrative so prized by Tom Wolfe in his influential 1973 work *The new journalism* and so important in many works of narrative nonfiction? If they choose to eschew narrative and simply present primary source documents, how comprehensible, not to mention readable, will that be for the audience? I will explore these questions by examining the work of two journalist-authors and an organisation: Bob Woodward, a best-selling author famous for the extraordinary access he gains to high-ranking public officials; Mark Danner, respected for balancing access to sources with independence from them but whose work reaches a much smaller audience than Woodward's, and WikiLeaks whose aim is to be a safe haven for whistleblowers disclosing important information. WikiLeaks' goals have oscillated since it began in 2006 but initially at least it aimed to provide all citizens with free access to these primary source materials so they could make up their own minds about them (Brevini, Hintz and McCurdy 2013: 2).

I will begin with Woodward because as well as being perhaps the most famous print journalist in the world he has been prominent for more than four decades. Woodward and his colleague Carl Bernstein won a place in history through their disclosures in *The Washington post* about the break-in at the Democratic Party's National Committee headquarters, at the Watergate hotel-office complex, in 1972, by people acting at the behest of the Republican president Richard Nixon. They wrote two books

together: *All the president's men* (1974) told the story of their newspaper reporting on Watergate and *The final days* (1976) told the story of the last 100 days of the Nixon presidency, to which their disclosures had substantially contributed. The books became, respectively, the number two and number one bestselling nonfiction books of the year in the United States (Hackett and Burke 1977).

Woodward and Bernstein split as a reporting team after *The final days* but where Bernstein since has been sporadic, Woodward has been prolific, releasing 16 more journalistic books as of 2013. All of Woodward's books have sold well; on release, disclosures in almost all of Woodward's books have generated front page news and been accompanied by a multi-media publicity campaign so well coordinated that Woodward's most recent biographer refers to him as a 'human brand' (Shepard 2007: 227). His aim, he says, has been to combine the skills of the investigative journalist with the narrative approach of a novelist to write contemporary history years before classified documents are made available to scholars. The claim for Woodward's work, then, is, first, that he has made many important disclosures in the public interest and, second, that the promise implicit in his 'fly-on-the-wall' narrative approach is that he will give his many readers a near contemporaneous close-up view of momentous events. There is a sizeable literature about Woodward, including two biographies (Havill 1993; Shepard 2007), exhaustive analysis of his role in Watergate (Schudson 1992; Holland 2012), investigation of his use of anonymous sources (Weinberg 1992), his reliance on reconstructed narrative scenes (Fuller 1996) and criticism of his modus operandi (Didion 2001).

Woodward often avows, in his flat Midwestern accent, that 'I am just a ra-por-ter' (Shepard 2007: 237) trying to find out what happened rather than analyse events he writes about, as if facts and their interpretation are always, irrevocably separate. In trying somehow to hold them apart, Woodward has left himself open to manipulation by his anonymous sources, an argument that his biographer, Alicia Shepard makes, ironically, by citing an anonymous source:

I think there are a number of cases where smart, smooth operators have fooled him and have figured out his appetite for the detail that he loves – the quotations, the atmosphere, the color, the dress, and so on, and they get the best of him ... People learn that if 'I give him that stuff, then I can give him my personal spin' (2007: 235).

The core ethical problem here, then, is that Woodward transplants what is a difficult, easily abused practice in news journalism – the use of anonymous sources – into narrative nonfiction where he makes it, almost literally, his trademark. In doing this, he resolves none of the problems of anonymous sourcing. He actually disregards the time available to writers of narrative nonfiction to build relationships and persuade his highly placed sources to speak on the record.

Asking sources for material to help reconstruct a scene is not automatically a problem for writers of narrative nonfiction, but it becomes a serious one for Woodward for several reasons: because he needs a lot of such assistance as he has not witnessed most of the events he writes about, because he is reliant on people practiced in the dark arts of manipulation, and because he tries to present highly contested events of historic importance in a seamless narrative that suggests to readers this is *exactly* how

events happened. Jack Fuller, a newspaper publisher, Pulitzer prize-winning journalist and author of five novels, questions Woodward's practice: 'It is one thing to infer certain feelings in a warm and flattering account of a father's pride at watching his son pitch his first professional baseball game and another to attempt to guess at what went through a policeman's mind as he fired a shot that killed an innocent boy' (1996: 153).

In narrative studies the once neutral term omniscient narrative voice has been picked apart to reveal its underlying assumption that authors literally know everything about their fictional universe, that they can direct their reader in any way they see fit and that readers will obey rather than actively interpret the narrator's work (Abbott 2008: 66, 194). This re-evaluation has significant implications for both writers and readers of narrative nonfiction. Genette describes omniscient narration in factual narrative as even more 'disrespectful' than in fiction 'since in quantitative terms it is less likely that an author would know the thoughts of all the characters than those of a single one' (1991: 67). If novelists are not quite the masters of their fictional universes they imagined, then, authors of narrative nonfiction certainly are not. The dangers of omniscient narration in nonfiction are epitomised in *The final days*, which famously reconstructs a tumultuous three hour meeting between Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry, Henry Kissinger, the night before Nixon became the first American president to be forced to resign. The reader is positioned inside the Lincoln Sitting Room as if she is watching events unfold on a critical night in American history. That is the scene's power; it is also its transgression. Woodward and Bernstein were strongly criticised over this and other intimate details in the book, sometimes on factual accuracy but more often for the omniscient narrative voice and for its 'unfeeling' tone (Shepard 2007: 144–46; Isaacson 1992: 597–600, 816 note 8). In later books Woodward has been more willing to show readers the seams in his narrative accounts even though the pitch and tone conveys if not omniscience then a claim to privileged status. In *Plan of attack*, a presidential briefing by General Tommy Franks in late 2001 about plans to invade Iraq is presented as a reconstructed scene over 12 pages but at one point the narrative is broken to include an interview with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld who recalled most of Franks' briefing but disputed some parts (Woodward 2004: 62). The dust jacket copy nevertheless reads: 'Woodward's fly-on-the-wall account reveals the secret meetings, key decisions, conflicts and raw emotions of war as they are rarely seen in contemporary history'.

There are two important implications of this shift in Woodward's approach that point us to the discussion of both Danner's work and that of WikiLeaks. The lack of public accountability for Woodward's anonymous sources has masked a shift in the nature and range of his sources over his career. Where *All the president's men* and *The final days* are the work of young outsiders – Woodward was 29 and Bernstein 28 when they broke the Watergate story – in later books Woodward has become a Washington insider (Shepard 2007: 235). Nixon did not talk to Woodward and Bernstein for their books, but later presidents have been interviewed, including Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter (*Shadow*, 1999: 518), George W. Bush (*Bush at war* 2002: xii; *Plan of attack* 2004: x) and Barack Obama (*Obama's wars* 2010: xii; *The price of politics* 2012: xiii). Where the first two Woodward books provide deeply unflattering portrayals of

those in power, in later books Woodward persuades political leaders to talk because ‘essentially, I write self-portraits’ (Didion 2001: 204). Danner says this shift compares unfavourably with the work of another veteran investigative reporter and writer of narrative nonfiction, Seymour Hersh. Where Woodward relies for his disclosures on officials at the highest levels of government, Hersh’s sources come from lower levels of the government and the intelligence bureaucracy. According to Danner where Woodward provides the ‘deeper’ version of what is, essentially, ‘the official story’, Hersh unearths a version of events that ‘the government does *not* want public – which is to say, a version that contradicts the official story of what went on’ (Sherman 2003: 42).

Novelist and cultural critic Joan Didion has gone further than Danner’s assessment, provocatively arguing that Woodward writes ‘political pornography’ (2001: 214). Didion argues Woodward writes books ‘in which measurable cerebral activity is virtually absent’ (194). That is, Woodward relentlessly accumulates quotidian details – what people eat, what they wear – but refuses to question the meaning of events or discuss the issues he is reporting. People within various administrations talk to Woodward because he grants them anonymity and because he reaches a mass audience. Does this mean Woodward’s books are so compromised as to be worthless? I would not go this far. First, Woodward may have traded too much of his editorial independence to gain access to powerful political figures but he remains an enterprising, experienced reporter who continues to make disclosures in the public interest. By giving readers what Danner terms a deeper version of the official story he provides what you might call a second draft of history, with the strengths and shortcomings implicit in that phrase. Woodward does gain remarkable access to hard-to-reach sources at the highest levels of government, intelligence agencies, the military and the bureaucracy. He is shown many high-level secret documents – an important point I will come back to in discussing WikiLeaks. He writes about what he finds in an accessible narrative style aimed at engaging a mass audience about dense and difficult subject matter. He regularly breaks news and he reaches a mass audience. These are substantial achievements. It is true that his prose is rarely seen as more than competent and usually described in far less flattering terms; the implications of that are beyond the scope of this article, however.

As is suggested in the earlier quotation from Danner, he reads Woodward’s work closely not for the literary style but because he understands that in many cases the version of events recorded in Woodward’s books has been sanctioned by those in power. That is, to put it at its bluntest, Woodward writes a media release for his most important sources that he disguises in the form of a fly-on-the-wall narrative account of events. If access to those in power lies at the heart of Woodward’s strength and his weakness as a journalist, then analysis of events is, similarly, both a strength and a limitation in Danner’s work. Where Woodward’s readers put down his books feeling they have been privy to decision-making far outside their experience, readers of Danner’s work come away with a better understanding of how and why events happened. Unlike Woodward, Danner spends at least some time witnessing for himself the events he writes about, and his reportage is certainly vivid, but his primary goal is to understand. As such, his work engages readers’ intellect more than the

emotions. Danner has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and won the Overseas Press Award for an article he wrote for the magazine subsequently published as a book in 1994, *The massacre at El Mozote: a parable of the Cold War*. He has contributed numerous articles to prestigious publications such as *The New York review of books*, which despite its title has encouraged Danner, and others like Timothy Garton Ash, to do their own first hand reporting to complement or augment their review-essays: a 500-page anthology of international reportage published in *The New York review of books* was released in 2013 to mark the publication's 50th anniversary. Danner has written numerous articles about the disastrous impact of the Bush administration's response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks that subsequently have been published as books, such as *Torture and truth* (2004) and *The secret way to war* (2006).

Danner was sceptical from early on about the Bush administration's response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, arguing in an article published in *The New York times* on 8 October 2002, five months before the United States' invasion of Iraq, that the government had failed to provide evidence for links between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein at least partly because it treated terror as a 'free-floating malignancy with no political history and no political goals'. Supplanting Hussein, though, would prove easier than building a new democratic order in Iraq, a country that under Saddam had endured the 'trauma of three decades of brutal dictatorship'.

From the beginning, then, Danner, unlike Woodward, refused to be a cheerleader for President Bush. The article mentioned above is one of 15 reprinted in *Stripping bare the body*, a substantial selection of Danner's work published in 2009. Reading them it is hard to dispute his evidence and argument showing just how disastrous the invasion of Iraq has been, for Iraqis, for American troops and for global opinion of American foreign policy, through policies and practices that were both misguided and mismanaged.

From the decision to invade Iraq, grounded in spurious evidence of Saddam's possession of weapons of mass destruction, to interagency brawling in the US government that meant there was no postwar planning, and from lying about whether torture was being used on suspected terrorists to re-defining torture as any interrogation practice that fell short of killing someone – these government actions, Danner argues, have caused and continue to cause incalculable damage. For Danner the use of torture is repugnant, but beyond that he reminds us that a report commissioned by the administration after the Abu Ghraib photos were publicised in 2004 found that nine out of ten detainees brought to the prison were of 'no intelligence value.' He shreds the Bush administration's stance on torture, which defended its questionable reliability in obtaining valuable information while lying about its use and misunderstanding how much damage it was doing to often innocent victims and to its stated policy goals. 'One does not reach democracy, or freedom, through torture,' comments Danner (2009: 418).

In several of his essays Danner draws on Woodward's work, but he treats it as a primary as much as a secondary source. Not for a moment does this mean that he trusts every word Woodward writes. He understands that Woodward's level of access

means that politicians' versions of events will be ventilated through Woodward's books and need to be weighed alongside other versions. For example, in an essay about the Bosnian wars of the 1990s, Danner weighed Woodward's account of a senior foreign policy adviser, Richard Holbrooke, against Holbrooke's own account (Danner 2009: 265–300 and 578: Note 1). As an experienced writer, Danner understands how some journalists treat their sources in print. He understands how they might airbrush some or even all of the uglier side of their sources' behavior in exchange for a detailed account of a critical meeting. He understands how a source, who has lost their position can be ruthlessly dumped by the journalist. He also understands the limits of Woodward's worldview and his unwillingness or inability to explain complex events.

Danner's parsing of Woodward's work to supplement his own reporting and aid his understanding about the 'war on terror' is most evident in two essays. The first is entitled 'The secret way to war' and was published in *The New York review of books* on 9 June 2005. It came after Woodward's largely uncritical account of the invasion of Iraq, *Plan of attack*, published in 2004, and also after the publication in May 2005 in *The Sunday times* of London of what became known as the Downing Street memo. This memo showed clearly that by July 2002 President Bush had determined the US would invade Iraq, and that 'the intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy' (Danner 2009: 435–36).

The then British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, pushed hard for the United Nations Security Council to become involved to demonstrate to his electorate that they would go to war as a last resort, not as a first choice; the latter was Bush's private but not his public position. Danner quotes Woodward's account in *Plan of attack* of the meeting at which Bush agreed to Blair's pleas, after which Bush tells the gathered British officials that 'your man has got *cojones*' (2009: 440). Woodward reports that Bush told him later: 'And of course these Brits don't know what *cojones* are'. Henceforth, Bush declares, this particular conference would be known as 'the *cojones* meeting' (Woodward 2004: 178). You could see this as an example of the adrenalin-infused anecdote that Woodward promises he and only he can get, or, as you reach the end of Danner's essay, you could see it as a salutary reminder of the perils of inside-the-Beltway journalism and, more importantly, of dishonesty and something less than courage on the part of the president.

The second, longer essay, entitled 'The war of the imagination' and published in *The New York review of books* on 21 December 2006, focuses on the staggering level of hubris and incompetence within the government and of how conflict between senior figures aggravated its problems, not to mention those of its troops and of the Iraqi people. Woodward is quoted a dozen times in the essay. Danner cites a National Security Presidential Directive signed by Bush on 29 August 2002 that Woodward had 'obtained', to use the blandly imprecise term preferred by journalists, and reprinted in *Plan of attack*. He revisits it as a way not only of showing the extent to which Bush lied about the reasons he publicly espoused for going to war but as part of his quest to understand how it was 'that so many highly accomplished, experienced and intelligent officials came together to make such monumental, consequential and, above all, obvious mistakes' (2009: 469).

Danner cites several passages from Woodward's third book about the Bush administration, *State of denial* (2006), which reconstructed scenes of high-level meetings between Bush and his most senior advisers that by now showed how the invasion had failed. Danner finds the scenes melodramatic, noting how Woodward, with his usual impeccable timing, cast the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, as the moustache-twirling villain who within a month of the book's release in 2006 would be scapegoated by Bush and forced to resign.

The Fall of Rumsfeld gives pace and drive to Woodward's narrative. No doubt this will please readers, who find themselves increasingly outraged at the almost unbelievable failures in planning and execution, rewarding them with a bracing wave of *schadenfreude* when the inevitable defenestration takes place ... Irresistible as Rumsfeld is, however, the story of the Iraq war disaster springs less from his brow than from that of an inexperienced and rigidly self-assured president who managed to fashion, with the help of a powerful vice-president, a strikingly disfigured process of governing (2009: 480).

Woodward remains fascinated by personal rivalries within government and habitually characterizes players like Rumsfeld with what Danner describes as 'Homeric epithets': in Rumsfeld's case it is 'legendary bureaucratic in-fighter'. Danner instead turns to the work of Ron Suskind, another narrative nonfiction author for a more nuanced interpretation of events. In *The one percent doctrine* Suskind writes:

Of the many reasons the president moved in this direction, the most telling may stem from George Bush's belief in his own certainty and, especially after 9/11, his need to protect the capacity to will such certainty in the face of daunting complexity. His view of right and wrong, and of righteous actions – such as attacking evil or spreading 'God's gift' of democracy – were undercut by the kind of traditional, shades-of-gray analysis that has been the staple of most presidents' diets (2006: 225–6).

Danner, then, offers readers thoroughly researched, lucid interpretations of the same dense and difficult events that Woodward covers but he writes primarily for an informed rather than a mass audience. Many of his reported pieces open with personal vignettes about something that happened in front of his eyes but after these vivid openings his work is written in an analytical rather than a narrative mode. There is of course nothing intrinsically wrong about that but it has had the effect of containing his readership.

The origins of WikiLeaks are not newspaper reporting as they were for Woodward, nor are they high-end magazine journalism as they were for Danner. WikiLeaks did believe in the value of informing ordinary people about what governments had hidden so that they would be better able to perform their democratic duty at an election. Such a belief sits squarely in the traditional fourth estate role of the news media. There is an adage variously attributed to newspaper proprietors Lord Northcliffe and William Randolph Hearst or to the writer George Orwell to the effect that 'News is what someone doesn't want published. All the rest is advertising'. It is undeniable that its eight years WikiLeaks has uploaded – or published, to use the old term – an impressive number of important disclosures in the public interest such as the 'Collateral Murder' video footage (WikiLeaks 2010 'Collateral murder'), the Aghan

war logs, the Iraq war logs and the diplomatic cables (for a summary, see Beckett and Ball 2012: 4–10). By 2010 WikiLeaks had become a globally recognized force attracting intense attention from politicians, the military, the media, scholars and the general public. Already a sizeable literature has been produced, ranging from journalistic biographies of its founding editor, Julian Assange (Leigh and Harding 2011 Fowler 2011) to accounts by disgruntled former associates (Domscheit-Berg 2011) to, more recently, collections of academic essays about the meaning, impact and implications of WikiLeaks (Beckett and Ball 2012 Brevini, Hintz and McCurdy 2013). The authors of these academic essays explore important issues, such as the extent to which WikiLeaks contributed to the Arab Spring (Brevini, Hintz and McCurdy 2013: 236–44), but I will focus on what WikiLeaks tells us about writer-source relationships and how to reach a mass audience ethically.

In one important way WikiLeaks has vaulted over the murky relationships that bedevil journalists and the sources who leak them sensitive material, whether the murk rises from trading independence for information (as we have seen with Woodward) or journalists becoming participants in events rather than simply observers. As the former Australian Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, told Chloe Hooper near the end of her fraught term in office: ‘The relationship between journalists and a politician is a co-dependent but not a transparent one’ (Hooper 2013: 32). WikiLeaks has been able to stand apart from these entanglements because it developed a way of encrypting documents online; whistleblowers could leak it material without fear of detection. When it did become entangled was through old-fashioned human error, and not on their part; it happened when Bradley Manning discussed documents he said he had leaked to WikiLeaks in an online chat room after which he was promptly turned over to US authorities (Brevini, Hintz & McCurdy 2013: 129–330). The imperviousness to detection, the vast volume of documents released and their impact have all, it appears, spurred a ferocious response on the part of governments, especially the Obama administration, which has charged six people (including Bradley Manning) under the Espionage Act for leaking – double the number charged by all previous presidents combined (Brevini, Hintz & McCurdy 2013: 136).

That WikiLeaks trades in floods rather than leaks makes it much more threatening to governments than Bob Woodward. Several commentators have pointed to the discrepancy in the way Woodward and WikiLeaks are treated when both disclose secret documents. The dust-jackets of Woodward’s books trumpet his ability to reveal classified documents; *The war within: a secret white house history 2006–2008* (2008) not only has the word secret in the sub-title but uses it five times in the dust-jacket copy. As former CIA general counsel, John Rizzo, notes, prosecuting Woodward would be well nigh impossible if the president or the CIA director had authorized the leaks (Shafer 2013). But as the ‘Secrecy News’ blogger, Steven Aftergood, put it: ‘I would hate to go to jail for having leaked to the wrong person,’ which is what appears to have happened with Manning and WikiLeaks (Isikoff 2010).

Turning to how WikiLeaks presents material, in the beginning it did not report the contents of primary source documents in the condensed form of the conventional news report but instead uploaded copies of entire original documents, as Assange outlined in a WikiLeaks Discussion Forum in late 2011:

I want to set up a new standard: ‘scientific journalism.’ If you publish a paper on DNA, you are required, by all the good biological journals, to submit the data that has informed your research—the idea being that people will replicate it, check it, verify it. So this is something that needs to be done for journalism as well. There is an immediate power imbalance, in that readers are unable to verify what they are being told, and that leads to abuse. (WikiLeaks Discussion Forum 2011)

These disclosures amount to literally millions of pages of documents, which immediately begs the question: who has the time to read them all? Even for those interested in a particular topic, say the Iraq war, there are nearly 400,000 military logs of US soldiers totalling 37 million words. For some of these caches of documents, a brief introduction was provided and they were grouped and could be browsed by various categories such as region, date and severity of event but readers without specialist knowledge who found the site and took – or had – the time to work their way through the materials soon found that, shorn of explanation or context, reading reams of official documents is neither a pleasurable nor illuminating experience, as is suggested in this extract from this log of a ‘vehicle borne’ improvised explosive device dated 14 August 2007:

4-1 08:360
Initial Report:
At 141930AUG07 1-9 CAV reports 4x VBIEDs detonated in the Ninewah Province, Khahtaniya vicinity 37SGA 4171 0950. Dagger blue 1 (PiTT) and Recon 6 B co 1-9 CAV and 4-6 CAV (SWT) are on scene assessing the site. Initial BDA is: 30x LN KIA and 60x LN WIA taken to Tal Afar and Sinjar Hospital. 1-9 CAV TMC and the FAS have been alerted. MTF

(WikiLeaks 2010 ‘The Iraq war logs’, <http://wikileaks.org/irq/report/2007/08/IRQ20070814n9434.html> [accessed 15 April 2013]).

Reaching and influencing a mass audience was one of Assange’s goals but he soon grew disillusioned; initially he had anticipated that the alternative media would pick up WikiLeaks’ disclosures and push them up and out to the ‘mid-tier media’ before reaching the leading mainstream news organizations, as he told ABC broadcaster Phillip Adams (Adams 2010). Then, in early 2010, he opted for a sharper edge to the original WikiLeaks model by editing and editorializing about leaked video footage shot from the cockpit of a US Army Apache helicopter that showed a group of armed Iraqis, plus two Reuters employees, being shot and killed. Nodding to its original model, WikiLeaks released the full, unedited 39 minute-long video but what most people saw was the edited 17 minute version that was entitled ‘Collateral Murder’ (WikiLeaks 2010 ‘Collateral murder’) and framed by a pungent quote from George Orwell. The events depicted in the video were shocking, especially as they were overlaid by the seemingly callous voices of the crew on board. But the decision to editorialize about the footage drew the kind of controversy that is harder to pin on

unvarnished primary source material, as some of those killed appeared to be part of the armed opposition to the US occupation of Iraq (Beckett and Ball 2012: 40–5).

Assange recounts in his ghost-written and half-finished (but still interesting) autobiography that he realized he needed the clout of global media brands such as *The guardian* in England, *The New York times* in the US and *Der spiegel* in Germany if he was to achieve his original goal. The simultaneous release through these three outlets in 2010 of, first, the Afghanistan war logs, then the Iraq war logs and finally a massive cache of diplomatic cables certainly did that. For a period WikiLeaks was seen as a globally influential organization set to revolutionize both democracy and journalism but as has been well documented this trajectory has at best stalled and at worst is crumbling, partly because Assange fell out in spectacular fashion with his media partners – nobody seems able to work with Assange for long but also the journalists’ habitual prickly arrogance towards interlopers was magnified by their crumbling authority in what Yochai Benkler calls the ‘networked fourth estate’ (Brevini, Hintz & McCurdy 2013: 11–34). Also contributing to WikiLeaks’ stall was Assange being charged with the sexual assault of two women in Sweden, and the ensuing round of court hearings and his seeking of asylum in the Ecuadorian embassy in London.

Amid the continuing uncertainty for Assange and WikiLeaks, what has been underappreciated is the extent to which it has been conventional journalistic methods of identifying newsworthiness, then condensing and contextualizing the information disclosed that has brought the disclosures to a mass audience. The many news reports and even the feature articles have so far, however, failed to provide readers with a full sense of the material contained in the disclosures. To date, for those wanting to understand the import of WikiLeaks’ various disclosures, not to mention the mercurial, fascinating personality of Assange himself, many readers have turned to two works of narrative nonfiction devoted to the WikiLeaks phenomenon – *WikiLeaks: Inside Julian Assange’s war on secrecy* (2011) by two journalists at *The guardian*, David Leigh and Luke Harding, and *The most dangerous man in the world* by Andrew Fowler (2011), a journalist with ABC television’s *Four corners*. Both books contain valuable material but both were written quickly and so were unable to take full advantage of the twin benefit for those writing narrative nonfiction instead of journalism – more space, and more time to make good use of it.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this comparison of aspects of the work of Bob Woodward, Mark Danner and WikiLeaks. First, the premium placed by some journalists on the primacy of gaining access to important newsmakers is as open to compromising editorial independence in narrative nonfiction books as it is in daily news reporting. Second, the compromises and information trading engaged in by practitioners such as Woodward does not irretrievably sully their work; for alert and adept practitioners such as Danner it provides a useful, sometimes valuable, primary source. It does mean, though, that Woodward’s books need to be read with as much awareness of what is not written as what is. Danner is clearly alive to these absences even if the average reader may well not be. That is an important issue, but one for another article. Third, works of narrative nonfiction driven primarily by analysis such as Danner’s can deepen readers’ understanding of complex events and issues but

unless they tell the story of how these events and issues shape individual lives they are unlikely to reach a broad audience. Finally, the stream of disclosures of primary source documents by WikiLeaks certainly fulfills the truth-telling claims that underpin narrative nonfiction but vast troves of material accompanied by relatively little narrative shaping renders the disclosures inaccessible, or at the least unappealing, to a broad audience. The various shortcomings of the work of Woodward, Danner and WikiLeaks by no means nullifies their value but they do, I argue, underscore the difficulties for writers of narrative nonfiction about politics to navigate between on the one hand gaining access to important sources and maintaining independence from them while at the same time constructing a narrative that is as true as it can be and engages readers' hearts as well as their minds.

Works cited

- Abbott, H Porter 2008 *The Cambridge introduction to narrative*, 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge UP
- Adams, Phillip 2010 'Springing a leak' Late night live, ABC Radio National 17 May, at <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/latenightlive/2010-05-17/3049832> (accessed 8 April 2013)
- Assange, Julian 2011 *The unauthorised autobiography*, Melbourne: Text
- Beckett, Charlie & James Ball 2012 *WikiLeaks: news in the networked era*, Cambridge: Polity P
- Brevini, Benedetta, Arne Hintz & Patrick McCurdy 2013 *Beyond WikiLeaks: implications for the future of communications, journalism and society*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan
- Danner, Mark 2009 *Stripping bare the body*, Melbourne: Black Inc
- Didion, Joan 2001 'Political pornography', in *Political fictions*, New York: Vintage, 191–214
- Domscheit-Berg, Daniel 2011 *Inside WikiLeaks: my time with Julian Assange at the world's most dangerous website*, London: Random House
- Fowler, Andrew 2011 *The most dangerous man in the world*, Carlton: Melbourne UP
- Fuller, Jack 1996 'News and literary technique', in *News values: ideas for an information age*, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 131–64
- Genette, Gerard 1991 *Fiction and diction*, trans. Catherine Porter, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993
- Hackett, Alice & James Burke 1977 *80 Years of bestsellers*, New York: RR Bowker
- Havill, Adrian 1993 *Deep truth*, New York: Birch Lane
- Holland, Max 2012 *Leak: how Mark Felt became deep throat*, Kansas: UP of Kansas
- Hooper, Chloe 2013 'Diary of a convert: sketches of a prime minister in her final months' *The monthly August*, 20–33
- Isaacson, Walter 1992 *Kissinger: a biography*, New York: Simon and Schuster
- Isikoff, Michael 2010 'Double standard in White House leak inquiries?' *NBCNews.com* 18 October, at http://www.nbcnews.com/id/39693850/ns/us_news-security/t/double-standard-white-house-leak-inquiries/ (accessed 2 August 2013)
- Leigh, David and Luke Harding 2011 *WikiLeaks: inside Julian Assange's war on secrecy*, London: Guardian
- Schudson, Michael 1992 *Watergate in American memory*, New York: Basic

- Shafer, Jack 2013 'Edward Snowden and the selective targeting of leaks' *Reuters.com* 11 June, at <http://blogs.reuters.com/jackshafer/2013/06/11/edward-snowden-and-the-selective-targeting-of-leaks/> (accessed 2 August 2013)
- Shepard, Alicia 2007 *Woodward and Bernstein*, New Jersey: John Wiley
- Sherman, Scott 2003 'The avenger: Sy Hersh, then and now' *Columbia journalism review* July/August, 34–44
- Sims, Norman 2007 *True stories: a century of literary journalism*, Evanston, Ill., Northwestern UP
- Suskind, Ron 2006 *The one percent doctrine*, New York: Simon and Schuster
- Weinberg, Steve 1992 'The secret sharer', in *Mother Jones* May/June, 52–9
- Weinberg, Steve 2007 'The Book as an investigative vehicle for news', in *Nieman reports* Spring, at <http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/issue/100013/Spring-2007.aspx> (accessed 17 March 2013)
- WikiLeaks 2010 'Collateral murder' 5 April, at http://wikileaks.org/wiki/Collateral_Murder,_5_Apr_2010 (accessed 14 August 2013)
- WikiLeaks 2010 'The Afghanistan war logs' 25 July, at <http://wikileaks.org/afg/> (accessed 10 February 2013)
- WikiLeaks 2010 'The Iraq war logs' 22 October, at <http://wikileaks.org/irq/> (accessed 11 February 2013)
- WikiLeaks discussion forum 2011 'Scientific journalism as defined by Assange is here! And needs your support' 8 November, at <http://www.wikileaks-forum.com/index.php?topic=5910.0> (accessed 15 April 2013)
- Wolfe, Tom & EW Johnson 1973 *The new journalism*, New York: Harper and Row
- Woodward, Bob & Carl Bernstein 1976 *The final days*, New York: Simon and Schuster
- Woodward, Bob 1999 *Shadow: five presidents and the legacy of Watergate*, New York: Simon and Schuster
- Woodward, Bob 2002 *Bush at war*, New York: Simon and Schuster
- Woodward, Bob 2004 *Plan of attack*, New York: Simon and Schuster
- Woodward, Bob 2006 *State of denial*, New York: Simon and Schuster
- Woodward, Bob 2008 *The war within: a secret white house history 2006–2008*, New York: Simon and Schuster
- Woodward, Bob 2010 *Obama's wars*, New York: Simon and Schuster
- Woodward, Bob 2012 *The price of politics*, New York: Simon and Schuster