

State Secrets: Ben Franklin and WikiLeaks

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By the eve of the American Revolution, the secret correspondence of the colonial governors of Massachusetts, New York, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina had been stolen, and its compromising contents soon turned up in colonial newspapers. As the confidential business of imperial administrators entered the public thoroughfares of print culture, the British Empire's control over communication seemed fragile and incomplete. More than two hundred years later, state secrets of the American empire have been exposed across digital superhighways, thanks to the insouciant journalism of WikiLeaks. It is perhaps more predictable than ironic that the twenty-first-century nation-state that emerged from those eighteenth-century colonies now finds itself unable to regulate the dumping of confidential cables involving everything from military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan to unguarded statements from Tony Blair and Hillary Rodham Clinton. To date, the most damaging material released by WikiLeaks has been decrypted video footage of a US Apache helicopter firing upon and killing a Reuters journalist and several others in a public square in Iraq.¹

The point of this historical collision is not to make WikiLeaks appear old-fashioned, nor is it to make eighteenth-century correspondents out to be precursors of digital activists. Rather, by drawing together the handwritten letters of mercantilist functionaries and electronic communiqués from what Manuel Castells calls “the network society,” this essay seeks to

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1. The video is widely available on the web, most notably at collateralmurder.com.

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insert a critical wedge in the history of the relationships among media, networks, and revolution.² Specifically, the linkage between the violations of eighteenth-century epistolary confidence and the disclosures of WikiLeaks invites a meditation on the revolutionary capacity of liberal subjects, who, as it turns out, may be most revolutionary when they cease to be identified or act as subjects at all. But revolutions are uneven and incommensurate, as Hannah Arendt observed some time ago of the colonial rebellion of 1776, which failed to address social misery with the same terrible force of France in 1789, to say nothing of the Haitian Revolution of 1791–1804, which is nowhere mentioned in *On Revolution*.³ So, too, it would be misleading to lump together the opposition seen in places as far-flung as Tahrir Square and Zuccotti Park simply because media networks such as Twitter and YouTube played a role in each. Nonetheless, the enduring fantasy of a sovereign subject provided *Time* magazine with enough encouragement to name “The Protestor”—and the singularity of this designation bears scrutiny—as “person of the year” for 2011.⁴ If news organizations were initially frustrated that no identifiable spokesperson stood out from Occupy Wall Street, *Time*’s annual stunt provided reassurance that a consistent subject existed “from the Arab Spring to . . . Occupy Wall Street,” one who could be represented by an iconic cover image of a presumably Arab woman, her eyes fixed in heroic defiance.

Whether it is the hagiography that began with Parson Weems’s *The Life of Washington* (1808) and continues with contemporary biographies of the founding fathers or *Time*’s creation of “The Protestor,” oppositional activity loses a good deal of its incalculable ferment when it is keyed to a recognizable subject. Against this sort of fixation, a critical approach that tracks how texts proliferate and speed across multiple geographies from private to public and from colonial periphery to imperial center and back

2. See Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Malden, Mass., 2000).

3. See Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York, 1963), pp. 49, 65.

4. Jurt Andersen, “The Protestor,” *Time*, 14 Dec. 2011, www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2101745_2102132_2102373,00.html

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again resists the artificial condensation of identity that is often a staple of histories of revolution. “The manifest secret of a discourse network that places ultimate value in the individual is never to inscribe the individual,” writes Friedrich Kittler, describing how eighteenth-century novels refrained from burdening their protagonists with specific physical attributes.⁵ By yoking together American colonial propaganda and the digital “hactivism” associated with WikiLeaks, this essay suggests how the unauthorized circulation of state secrets and other official information has potentially revolutionary implications for political identities. These implications are bound up with patterns of textual dissemination and circulation, which, because they often propagate information and rumor quickly and continuously, try to safeguard network secrecy by not revealing an individual at the end of a paper (or digital) trail.

The interpretative charge here is to resist lavishing attention on content and thereby setting up texts as static artifacts as opposed to mobile materials. Still, it is not always easy to study objects in motion, and readings that pin down texts—like butterflies under glass—risk missing how everything from handwritten letters to rashly sent emails do not simply signify but circulate. Indeed, meaning is bound up with movement, especially the propagation of messages and other texts across epistolary, print, and digital cultures. The content of eighteenth-century letters that were subject to theft, interception, and other vicissitudes of transatlantic exchange, like the mixture of revelation and diplomatic sniping contained in the document dumps facilitated by WikiLeaks, is surely noteworthy. But an exclusive focus on content can obscure the networks that relay and spread information, diffusing agency to the point where familiar notions of political identity eventually dissolve.

To put this concern in the concrete terms of this essay’s title: if networks like WikiLeaks disperse information via a connective tissue of links, relays, and nodes, what happens when Ben Franklin is viewed as a network hub that disestablishes agency so as to speed the propagation of information? One outcome is that Franklin’s attempt to render himself insignificant appears as a revolutionary take on identity. But another and contrasting conclusion is that networks reanimate notions of subjectivity that remain consistent with conventional political identities. I explore this tension by beginning with a discussion of how the network presence of WikiLeaks paradoxically recuperates heroic and celebrity versions of subjectivity, tethering politics to some rather stable coordinates. The final two sections

5. Friedrich A. Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, trans. Michael Metteer and Chris Cullens (Stanford, Calif., 1990), p. 119.

examine colonial propagandists who participated in epistolary networks, often effacing their own roles in order to propel the idea of revolution beyond the limits of identity.

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The real disclosure of WikiLeaks is not a cache of secret government cables. Nor are pronouncements that the unrestricted flow of state secrets facilitated by a stateless organization has ushered in an era of global transparency particularly surprising. Foremost in trumpeting these claims about the significance of WikiLeaks is its controversial founder, Julian Assange, who views open access to information as integral to a new type of network activism. Yet for all its newness, such networked agency seems cast in the familiar image—the liberal subject of American democracy. The highest principles are cited in defense of this subject: the press defends the release of confidential diplomatic communiqués as an example of Western openness opposed to fundamentalist terror; Assange frames his activities with reference to Thomas Jefferson and landmark US Supreme Court decisions; even former insiders who have become disillusioned with “the world’s most dangerous website” dedicate their efforts to the First Amendment of the US Constitution.⁶ Ultimately, around the debate over WikiLeaks—does democracy require full transparency? is secrecy indispensable to honest communications? at what point does public access to information become a national security risk?—orbits an unexamined position. “What isn’t questioned,” as Slavoj Žižek writes, “is the democratic-liberal framing” of the WikiLeaks affair at the outset.⁷

So what then is the disclosure of WikiLeaks? Potential meanings of WikiLeaks have been confused by ancillary events, ranging from accusations that Assange had unprotected sex with and raped two women in Sweden to celebrations of Assange as “rockstar of the year” that appeared in the Italian *Rolling Stone*. When Sarah Palin targets Assange as an “anti-

6. Bill Keller makes the argument that “if the freedom of the press makes some Americans uneasy, it is anathema to the ideologists of terror” (Bill Keller, “The Boy Who Kicked the Hornet’s Nest,” in *Open Secrets: WikiLeaks, War, and American Diplomacy*, ed. Alexander Star [New York, 2011], p. 17). On Assange’s appeal to American values, see “What Is Wikileaks?” www.wikileaks.ch/About.html. Daniel Domscheit-Berg dedicates his *Inside WikiLeaks: My Time with Julian Assange at the World’s Most Dangerous Website*, trans. Jefferson Chase (New York, 2011) “to the First Amendment and those defending the world’s most precious bastion of freedom of speech” (p. iv). For comprehensive treatment of these and other issues involving the “networked fourth estate,” see Yochai Benkler, “A Free Irresponsible Press: Wikileaks and the Battle over the Soul of the Networked Fourth Estate,” *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* 46 (Summer 2011): 311–97.

7. Slavoj Žižek, “Good Manners in the Age of WikiLeaks,” *London Review of Books*, 20 Jan. 2011, www.lrb.co.uk/v33/no2/slavoj-zizek/good-manners-in-the-age-of-wikileaks

American operative with blood on his hands” who should be hunted down with “the same urgency [used to] pursue al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders,”⁸ and when a Democratic pundit advises that “a dead man can’t leak stuff” so why not “illegally shoot the son of a bitch,”⁹ extremist rhetoric masks the fact that these assessments lavish attention on a fairly recognizable political entity who may or may not be a villain but is always the subject of American-style liberal individualism. Media coverage appeals to armchair psychology to “explain” this subject, as the *Guardian* did, by noting that Assange, like many brilliant hackers, comes from a broken home. Therapeutic narrative becomes relentless in background profiles that “explain” the actions of Bradley Manning—the low-level Army specialist alleged to have downloaded over 250,000 confidential documents to a rewritable CD of Lady Gaga tracks—as stemming from his outcast status as a gay subject serving in the military. In resurrecting subjects, even transgressive ones, such explanations also resurrect the juridical force of the law that makes them subjects in the first place.

In short, the lesson of WikiLeaks may be a counterlesson. At the end of this network of “a high security anonymous drop box fortified by cutting-edge cryptographic information technologies” stands an identity conventional enough to be recognized by everyone from Palin to the celebrants of digital democracy.¹⁰ This conclusion at first seems contradictory. Encryption, digitally untraceable sources, and the use of mirroring sites would seem to mask individual identities, after all. Yet such technological misdirection encourages, not the evaporation of identity, but its protection from government reprisal. Likewise, electronic protocols of anonymization used by WikiLeaks do not render identity irrelevant but instead establish individuality as an endangered and therefore cherished political resource. In effect, networks do not so much disperse agency as consolidate and safeguard it. This counterlesson not only deflates some of the optimism that WikiLeaks signals the emergence of a new type of network actor, one whose digital subjectivity defies state

8. Quoted in Martin Beckford, “Sarah Palin: Hunt WikiLeaks Founder Like al-Qaeda and Taliban Leaders,” *The Telegraph*, 30 Nov. 2010, www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/wikileaks/8171269/Sarah-Palin-hunt-WikiLeaks-founder-like-al-Qaeda-and-Taliban-leaders.html. It is worth remembering that WikiLeaks also released Palin’s hacked emails.

9. Quoted in Michael Moore, “Why I’m Posting Bail Money for Julian Assange,” *The Huffington Post*, 14 Dec. 2010, www.huffingtonpost.com/michael-moore/why-im-posting-bail-money_b_796319.html

10. “What Is Wikileaks?” www.wikileaks.ch/About.html. Bodó Balázs argues that Wikileaks or Wikileakistan, as he calls it, re-creates the very sovereignty that it attacks; see Bodó Balázs, “Wikileaks and Freedom, Autonomy and Sovereignty in the Cloud,” 10 Mar. 2011, cyberlaw.stanford.edu/node/6635

inscription, since in the end this subject claims a legal and rhetorical status that closely resembles that of the traditional person of liberal democracy. It also implies that the interdisciplinary endeavor among physicists, computer scientists, and communications theorists on the complex relationships within systems, which has become known as network theory, may recuperate older forms of identity that slow down and obstruct the dissemination of information that is often touted as a primary feature of networks.¹¹

“Who is Julian Assange?” asks the *New York Times*’s doorstep volume on WikiLeaks, *Open Secrets*. Similar biographical queries that motivate efforts like *WikiLeaks and the Age of Transparency* (associated with the Personal Democracy Forum) and *Inside WikiLeaks* (associated with OpenLeaks), whether depicting Assange as an “egomaniacal, crypto-anarchic destroyer of diplomatic traditions” or an activist in the mold of Daniel Ellsberg and the *Pentagon Papers*, seek to inscribe an individual who stands apart from and in opposition to state power.¹² Despite the mobility of classified cables that were first transmitted, then downloaded and leaked, and finally published worldwide, individuality remains a fixed feature across this fluid terrain of circulation. “Has technology decisively now tipped the balance of power away from governments and toward individuals?” muses a reporter in *Open Secrets*.¹³ The unconfirmed public knowledge implied by “open secrets” sounds a lot like the “manifest secret” described by Kittler as a primary feature of discourse networks but with this critical difference: instead of keeping individuals hidden within the folds of the network, assessments of WikiLeaks conclude with the recognition of political actors energized by the presumably democratizing power of technological communications.

But it is not only journalistic punditry that returns compulsively to a democratic “person.” Even theoretical discourse devoted to disestablish-

11. The field is diverse and growing and has spread across disciplines to include work by sociologists, Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York, 2005), and Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*; physicists like Albert-László Barabási, *Linked: The New Science of Networks* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002); literary critics like Steven Shaviro, *Connected, or What It Means to Live in the Network Society* (Minneapolis, 1999), and Matt Cohen, *The Networked Wilderness: Communicating in Early New England* (Minneapolis, 2010); medical sociologists like Nicholas A. Christakis and James H. Fowler, *Connected: The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives* (New York, 2009); and filmmakers like James Der Derian, “9.11: Before, after, and in Between,” *Social Science Research Council*, essays.src.org/sept11/essays/der_derian.htm

12. John F. Burns and Ravu Somaiya, “Who Is Julian Assange?” in *Open Secrets*, p. 26. For comparisons of Assange and Ellsberg, see Micah L. Sifry, *WikiLeaks and the Age of Transparency* (Berkeley, 2011), pp. 28–32.

13. Scott Shane, “Can the Government Keep a Secret?” in *Open Secrets*, p. 338.

ing the subject of bourgeois liberalism becomes fascinated with the individuality cloaked by the computer mirroring sites, volunteer servers, and links that characterize digital networks. To get specific and name names, this attachment persists in Žižek's commentary on WikiLeaks. Franklin, as we will see in a bit, offers an important counterexample in his many personae let loose across Atlantic epistolary and print exchanges, but first it is necessary to chart how even though Žižek and others herald WikiLeaks as the fortunate demise of an autonomous subject, their accounts of the phenomenon revert to heroic forms of individuality.

The significance of WikiLeaks to democracy became visible as a media event in the summer of 2011 when Assange, Žižek, and Amy Goodman of Democracy Now! appeared together on a London stage to discuss the political, ethical, and philosophical dimensions of information networks under global capitalism. Websites across the world streamed the forum live, as Žižek was introduced as “the Elvis of cultural theory.”¹⁴ At one point Goodman even turns to Žižek and asks him about rumors that he and Lady Gaga are dating. It would seem that just being associated with WikiLeaks invites rock-star celebrity, which is strange for an organization that prides itself on the anonymity of its sources. Žižek, of course, was well known before Cablegate, but he emerged as a salient figure in the debate when first in the *London Review of Books* and then in *Living in the End Times* he heralded WikiLeaks as the fortunate end of a knowing, empowered subject. No longer does political resistance follow a familiar ideological screenplay—Žižek's examples are *All the President's Men* (dir. Alan J. Pakula, 1976) and *The Pelican Brief* (dir. Pakula, 1993)—“in which a couple of ordinary guys uncover a scandal which reaches right up to the President, forcing him to step down.” While many commentators and critics have sought to tame WikiLeaks by coopting its media insurgency as evidence of Western journalism's progressive values, in effect setting up this stateless organization as “the darling of liberal freedom-fighters,” Žižek is adamant that its meaning not be reduced to a feel-good script. Despite this refusal to accede to “the liberal appropriation of the WikiLeaks saga” demanded by cinematic explanations of network politics, the role of the heroic political individual has been reprised to great media fanfare by not just Assange but also Žižek.¹⁵ This fantasy of individual agency resurrects itself at the Democracy Now! forum at which the two shared top billing. Žižek asks the

14. Julian Assange, Amy Goodman, and Žižek, “From Our Archives: Full Video of WikiLeaks' Julian Assange and Philosopher Slavoj Žižek with Amy Goodman” 16 Aug. 2012, www.democracynow.org/blog/2012/8/16/from_our_archives_full_video_of_wikileaks_julian_assange_philosopher_slavoj_izek_with_amy_goodman; hereafter abbreviated “F.”

15. Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (New York, 2011), p. 408. This work reframes and adds to

audience to imagine a scenario in which his daughter has been kidnapped—since “somebody has to play this role”—with Assange as a malefactor with knowledge of her whereabouts (“F”). Enter Žižek and Goodman to play the role of torturers who will use an array of ghastly medical techniques to extract information.

Žižek is seeking to illustrate a point about the legalization of torture, but Goodman stops him in his tracks. “Speak for yourself, Slavoj,” she tells him twice, good-naturedly resisting his attempt to make her adopt the role of a hypothetical torturer. Žižek counters by turning to actual persons, namely Bradley Manning, to declare him “the hero” of the entire episode for placing a fundamental ethics before a questionable legalism and objecting to a system that normalized torture (“F”). The Nobel Peace Prize should be bestowed on this communications dissident, Žižek asserts to the applause of the audience. The forum gets routed into a discussion of recognizable actors who are legible because of their cinematic status: the daughter as damsel in distress, the quiet man pushed to the edge, the hero. This performance of the political is hardly new.¹⁶ Express moral outrage. Display principle. Face an ethical dilemma. Act on conviction. That is, consolidate an image of politics as simultaneously expanded and limited to the power of the individual. The resolution is that even as Cablegate makes a knowing subject obsolete, the critical phenomenon of WikiLeaks also witnesses the reemergence of a plucky individual who revitalizes ethics.

Data spillages of diplomatic cables and war logs are hardly irrelevant.¹⁷ A complex network of thousands of volunteer global computer servers, using encryption protocols first developed by the US Naval Research Laboratory but since adopted by hackers covering their tracks, has earned WikiLeaks notoriety as a secure hub for relaying confidential messages. Known as the Onion Router or simply Tor, this software relies on onion-like layers to protect against electronic eavesdropping, enabling the multiple actors of WikiLeaks to dematerialize in a stateless flow of

Žižek’s earlier comments on WikiLeaks published in the *London Review of Books*; see Žižek, “Good Manners in the Age of WikiLeaks.”

16. Indeed, the scenario that Žižek conjures up seems borrowed from Pierre Morel’s *Taken* (2008) in which the daughter of a former CIA operative is abducted into white slavery. The hero, played by Liam Neeson, tortures and/or kills anyone who may have information of his daughter’s whereabouts.

17. For a list of some of WikiLeaks’ disclosures prior to Cablegate, see David Kushner, “Click and Dagger: Inside Wikileaks’ Leak Factory,” *Mother Jones*, 2 Jun. 2010, www.motherjones.com/politics/2010/07/click-and-dagger-wikileaks-julian-assange-iraq-video-updated

information.¹⁸ But the reverse seems more likely: the network produces WikiLeaks as a recognizable digital actor with Assange as its ultimate embodiment. In an ironic twist, this entity alarms commentators who are usually the first to defend individual agency as a cornerstone of neoliberal freedom. Thomas Friedman worries that WikiLeaks are “superempowered individuals” whose emergence the US should monitor as closely as it keeps tabs on superpowers like China.¹⁹ In other words, it is fine to promote individuality unless those who embody it agitate for causes that the US opposes. Media exposés focusing on a single networked agent dominate to the point that newspapers are mining Assange’s internet dating profile from 2006 for clues because, as the *Guardian* put it, “it is impossible to write this story”—a story of how networks shred government secrecy to bits—“without telling the story of Julian Assange himself.”²⁰

Refusing to dwell on personality in this way, Saroj Giri looks past the fetish of identity to search for the significance of “WikiLeaks beyond WikiLeaks.” For Giri, a political scientist at the University of Delhi, WikiLeaks provides an “exceedingly abstract notion of power” that falsely attributes agency to a narrow set of players.²¹ Call such players *Time* magazine’s “the protestor,” Friedman’s superempowered individual, or the profile of Assange that emerged in places like the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*; the consistent feature remains the idea of a sovereign actor. The backdrop is appropriately feudal, as power is held on high by a small set of agents conspiring to keep the veil drawn over state secrets. Meanwhile, WikiLeaks is outside the castle, battering at the firewalls for the truth. “We are the underdogs,” says Assange.²² But the significance of WikiLeaks does not consist in the disclosures that some hardy band of

18. See David Leigh and Luke Harding, *WikiLeaks: Inside Julian Assange’s War on Secrecy* (New York, 2011), pp. 53–54, as well as www.torproject.org

19. Thomas L. Friedman, “We’ve Only Got America A,” in *Open Secrets*, p. 399.

20. Leigh and Harding, *WikiLeaks*, p. 6. “Why is the coverage of Julian Assange so personal?” asks C. W. Anderson in a web installation on “Politics in the Age of Secrecy and Transparency” (C. W. Anderson, “Spotlights and Shadows Revisited: The Case of Julian Assange,” *The New Everyday*, 22 Apr. 2011, mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/tne/pieces/spotlights-and-shadows-revisited-case-julian-assange). Anderson’s answer is that Assange, like many iconic figures of the cultural Left in the 1960s, consents to journalistic celebrity in order to secure an audience for scoops and exposés.

21. Saroj Giri, “WikiLeaks beyond WikiLeaks,” *Mute*, 16 Dec. 2010, metamute.org/en/articles/WikiLeaks_beyond_WikiLeaks; hereafter abbreviated “W.” Finn Burton argues that the “least interesting things about WikiLeaks” may be WikiLeaks itself (Finn Burton, “After WikiLeaks, Us,” *The New Everyday*, 4 Apr. 2011, mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/tne/pieces/after-wikileaks-us).

22. Assange, “Don’t Shoot Messenger for Revealing Uncomfortable Truths,” *The Australian*, 8 Dec. 2010, www.theaustralian.com.au/in-depth/wikileaks/dont-shoot-messenger-for-revealing-uncomfortable-truths/story-fn775xjq-1225967241332

internet marauders brings to light. Instead, as Giri argues, WikiLeaks “challenged power by challenging the normal channels of challenging power” (“W”). What matters are the pathways for getting at content and then spreading it. Marshall McLuhan famously downplayed content to focus on the medium, arguing that a fixation with the obvious blinds us to the social impact of media’s transmission and spread.²³ If McLuhan concluded rather ominously by wondering about our enslavement to media content, critical observers of WikiLeaks express guarded optimism that the network mode of spilling secrets—more than the secrets themselves—carries insurgent potential. “Wikileaks’ action is therefore at one level a purely formal gesture, the audacity of the act, which stands on its own irrespective of how damning the actual contents of the leaks have been for the US and other governments,” writes Giri (“W”). Žižek echoes this position by arguing that while WikiLeaks exceeds liberal formations of subjection, “we should not look for this excess at the level of content.”²⁴

Where then should we look? To form, not in a traditional literary sense but as a matter of circulation and the diffusions created by network flows. Critical interest in networks seen everywhere from the distribution of social connectivity in *Bleak House* to the web of relationships in films like *Syriana* (dir. Stephen Gagan, 2005) and *Babel* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2006) allows us to see presumably static texts as moving targets that propel objects, information, and other types of content across geographic space.²⁵ Texts do not just mean or signify; they also travel from site to site, their transit and amplitude enhanced by technologies of conveyance, which include everything from envelopes and sealing wax for letters, ink and printing presses for pamphlets, and computer servers for email. Although hardwired with different levels of technological sophistication, such networks can propagate content relentlessly so that a single message often metastasizes, generating responses, counterclaims, and links. But the content of communication pales in comparison to the significance of its propagation. More revolutionary—as politics becomes indistinguishable from communication—is the mobility of the message, its propagation and dissemination.

23. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (Cambridge, Mass., 1964), p. 9. See also Kittler’s version of this idea: “Not content or message but the medium itself” signaled the end of German romantic idealism (Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, p. 178).

24. Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, p. 408.

25. See Caroline Levine, “Narrative Networks: *Bleak House* and the Affordances of Form,” *Novel* 42 (Fall 2009): 517–23, and Patrick Jagoda, “Terror Networks and the Aesthetics of Interconnection,” *Social Text*, no. 105 (Winter 2010): 65–89.

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Propaganda is the preeminent mode for spreading and scattering. Its functions elicit institutions and patterns of dissemination: correspondence networks, print networks, digital networks. Back in the 1920s when Edward Bernays inaugurated the study of mass persuasion, he defended propaganda by anticipating the biological metaphors that frequently crop up in network theory. He describes propaganda as a living organism that is connected at a cellular level. Rather than isolating the individual, propaganda targets the individual “as a cell organized into the social unit.” Bernays describes a hypothetical citizen, one John Jones, a lodge member, churchgoer, regular golfer, professional man, and a supporter of the local chamber of commerce. Each of Jones’s social connections is a marker of middle-class existence, but viewed collectively they become nodes of propagation. Less a person than an information hub, Jones “will tend to disseminate” the opinions that he receives from other hubs, creating an “invisible, intertwining structure of groupings and associations.” Jones appears relatively insignificant compared to the network that allows him to receive and send opinions. Now imagine multiple numbers of John Joneses linked together by churches, professional organizations, country clubs, and so on. Bernays calls this vast network “the public mind,” and the singularity of his expression here should not go unnoticed, for the point of *Propaganda* (1928) is to manage and control this flow of opinion.²⁶

The “meaning of a message cannot be isolated from its mode of propagation,” writes Steven Shaviro in *Connected, or What It Means to Live in the Network Society*. Propagation, however, seems inherently sinister, akin to a contaminant or virus that “harasses . . . attacks . . . or parasitically invades” its hosts.²⁷ Americans circa 1776 no doubt felt harassed by government policies, but they also discovered revolutionary possibilities within the transatlantic correspondence networks that the empire maintained. Letter writing and espionage were always proximate activities.²⁸ Even though King George III and his ministry sat at the center of this web, its filaments often behaved independently of any sovereign center. Correspondence networks formed a decentralized communications grid that existed alongside—indeed, often inside the very same envelope—the more regular and linear set of exchanges that flowed between the metropole and its North American colonies. More significant than the sending and receipt

26. Edward L. Bernays, *Propaganda* (1928; New York, 2005), pp. 55, 44, 38.

27. Steven Shaviro, *Connected, or What It Means to Live in the Network Society* (Minneapolis, 2003), p. 24.

28. See Bryce Traister, “Criminal Correspondence: Loyalism, Espionage, and Crevecoeur,” *Early American Literature* 27, no. 3 (2002): 469–96.

of private letters between individuals, correspondence encompasses a range of public activities, including the recitation of letters aloud, the printing of handwritten letters in newspapers, the transmission of pamphlets, and the sending of circular letters by local governments.

Characterized by quick bursts but also the delays that dogged all transatlantic communication, epistolary networks of the eighteenth-century revolutionary world do not behave much like today's advanced technological networks. Still, letters were never dead on arrival. They were sent and exchanged, opened by third parties and forwarded without permission, shared in social circles and reprinted in newspapers. At issue is how communication spreads and metastasizes, how ideas proliferate and take root, how views and opinions propagate themselves. This biological resonance takes us back to the derivation of propaganda from *propagare*, meaning to reproduce (plants) or to produce (offspring) with the implication that such activities extend a species' range and assure its survival. While Bernays believed that mass persuasion provides mechanisms to solidify and singularize democracy on a large scale, the tempestuous *printscape* of British North America suggests a decentralized terrain in which propaganda makes democracy not manageable but erratic, not coherent but herky-jerky, not consensual but splintered by conflict.²⁹

Extensive epistolary networks were perhaps the most important technology for administering a vast trading empire and for making far-flung British subjects feel that they belonged to a transatlantic community. Bridging gaps of time and space, letters helped maintain vertical loyalties that radiated governmental power outward from London to the provinces in England, Scotland, and America. But correspondence "also permitted lateral communication among the king's subjects independently of the London authorities."³⁰ As a pathway for transmitting rumor and accusation

29. I prefer the idea of *printscape* instead of the more familiar print culture because it suggests the shifting formations that characterize other scapes such as landscapes and mediascapes. Landscape frequently entails dynamic geographies where the unevenness of physical features, the pull of the horizon, the interplay of weather and environment, and other effects create a sense of movement in an otherwise static representation. For Arjun Appadurai, who first developed the idea of mediascapes, "the suffix -scape allows us to point to the fluid, irregular shapes" in which people, capital, technology, images move (Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Culture Economy," *Public Culture*, no. 2 [Spring 1990]: 7). So irregular is a *printscape* that it included handwritten letters and other materials not prepared by a printing press. But the most significant irregularity entails distribution, which ebbed and flowed in response to the availability of writing materials, impassable roads, dangerous seas, and a host of other accidents introduced by human suspicion, scheming, and other character traits archived by the epistolary novel.

30. Eve Tavor Bannet, *Empire of Letters: Letter Manuals and Transatlantic Correspondence, 1688–1820* (Cambridge, 2005), p. 225. Letters were routinely stolen, intercepted, forged, or reprinted with unauthorized interpolations. So commonplace were counterfeiting and

in addition to tamer forms of knowledge and information, correspondence never congealed into a unitary system. Transatlantic communication supported a “multiplicity of epistolary networks” that relayed information, official and unofficial, sanctioned and unsanctioned, public and private.³¹ As letters and print traveled the Atlantic, their passage slow and uncertain, much more than information and rumor were diffused. Identity and authority got caught up in correspondence networks, enlarged across imperial time and space but also spread thin and attenuated. This simultaneous expansion and weakening of agency reveals a contradictory and, in the context of the times, a potentially revolutionary form of political agency that had little use for familiar notions of identity itself.

In theoretical accounts of networks, whether composed of digital bits or foolscap and India ink, individual agency becomes unmoored from stable locations and is set adrift along an interconnected web of tendril-like links and nodes. In the anxious landscape of twenty-first-century depictions of terrorist networks, as Patrick Jagoda observes, accident and unpredictability expose human agents to radical contingency.³² New media do not have a lock on disaggregation. A baggy nineteenth-century form, like a sprawling Dickens novel, discloses a complex social world that replaces “the centrality of persons with the agency of networks,” according to Caroline Levine.³³ As primary conduits not just for news and information but also for spreading invective and fueling outrage, for sharing grievances and creating sympathy, for promoting revolutionary identifications and spurring emotions that gave colonial American politics its unremitting psychological edge, eighteenth-century epistolary networks are hardwired for propaganda. With its public sharing and unauthorized exposure of private letters, its pirated editions and quick production of pamphlets, its reprinting and plagiaries, all encouraging more writing and printing, the printscape of early America prefigures a contemporary mediascape with its propagation of threads, links, and digital nodes. As a network, the significance of transatlantic propaganda lies not so much in specific documents as in the tangle of connections among them. Circulation, distribution,

violations of privacy that print culture became a zone that both confirmed and called into question the status of written knowledge. On this point, see Adrian Johns’s comprehensive *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago, 1998). In this context, Tory writers like Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope expressed apprehension that the widening of print culture generated “an insane proliferation” of opinions and viewpoints (Christian Thorne, *The Dialectic of Counter-Enlightenment* [Cambridge, Mass., 2009], p. 223).

31. Bannet, *Empire of Letters*, p. x.

32. See Jagoda, “Terror Networks,” p. 75.

33. Levine, “Narrative Networks,” p. 520.

and, above all, propagation emerge as the defining features of network forms, changing the way readers approach texts. Rather than parsing the single letter, pamphlet, or other document, the interpretative charge is to read its strange travels and look for the connections it creates. Out of such correspondences publics congeal. If, as Michael Warner argues, “no single text can create a public,” it is also unlikely that some magic number—one hundred books or a thousand letters—will do the job either.³⁴ Instead, something of a paradox exists in which the dispersion of texts across a network draws people together.

When British sailors boarded a Newport ferry and intercepted correspondence from the Continental Congress, the letters were doctored to include a lewd reference about procuring “little Kate the Washer-woman’s Daughter” to satisfy General Washington’s fancy.³⁵ While in Philadelphia attending the Continental Congress in July 1775, Adams had entrusted a packet of correspondence, also containing letters written by fellow delegate Benjamin Harrison, to a fellow Massachusetts resident named Benjamin Hitchborn. Having come under suspicion as a Tory, Hitchborn hoped that he could dispel doubts about his patriotism by returning to the Boston area and announcing to neighbors that he was carrying Adams’s confidential letters. But neither Hitchborn nor the letters made it to their destination. Apprehended by the British navy, Hitchborn was imprisoned on the British flagship, and the letters were turned over to the squadron commander and passed to General Gage in Boston. Adams’s grandson later faulted Hitchborn for “singular want of courage or presence of mind” for not destroying the letters or tossing them overboard before British officers searched him.³⁶ The British supposed that they had discovered incriminating documents and hastened to publicize their contents—but not without first adding a bit of salacious detail to Harrison’s letter about Washington’s prurient interest in a working-class girl.³⁷ For the remainder of the embarrassing material in the letters—namely, a reference to a colleague in the

34. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York, 2002), p. 90.

35. Quoted in Allen French, “The First George Washington Scandal,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 65 (Nov. 1935): 469.

36. Charles Francis Adams, *The Life of John Adams*, in John Adams, *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, 10 vols. (Boston, 1856), 1:180.

37. For more on correspondence, interception, and printing in eighteenth-century America, see Jeremy Black, “Eighteenth-Century Intercepted Dispatches,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 11 (Oct. 1990): 138–43; Paul Langford, “British Correspondence in the Colonial Press, 1763–1775: A Study in Anglo-American Misunderstanding before the American Revolution,” in *The Press and the American Revolution*, ed. Bernard Bailyn and John B. Hench (Worcester, Mass., 1980), pp. 273–313; Thomas C. Leonard, “News for a Revolution: The Exposé in America, 1768–1773,” *Journal of American History* 67 (June 1980): 26–40; Arthur M. Schlesinger, *Prelude to Independence: The Newspaper War on Britain, 1764–1776* (New York,

Continental Congress, John Dickinson, as a “piddling genius”—Adams only had himself to blame since in a moment of vexation he had penned an incautious line, although he would also later assert that the “British printers made it worse than it was in the original” in an effort to portray the Congress as petty and bickering.³⁸

The bigger scandal proved to be the political infighting that Loyalists saw in Adams’s letters. When a Tory newspaper announced in a headline, “Genuine Copies of the Intercepted Letters Mentioned in Our Last,” it sought to depict Adams as overreaching in his plans for establishing a navy, devising a new constitution, consolidating legislative and executive powers, in short, for rashly urging a separation from England.³⁹ “I had explicitly avowed my designs of independence” in the letters, Adams recalled (*D*, 2:412). But the efforts of the Loyalist press backfired, according to Adams, since it was the circulation of his intercepted letters that first popularized the idea of independence. If the British made him into an inadvertent but willing propagandist for an independent American state, then it was an idea that dates back to these letters and “not from the publication of ‘Common Sense,’” as Adams took care to correct the historical record after his own fashion in his diary (*D*, 2:412). In claiming priority over *Common Sense*, which would not appear until the next year in 1776, Adams implicitly challenged Thomas Paine for the title of American propagandist.

Aside from revealing a touch of Adams’s egotism, the incident suggests how letters disseminate ideas and shape public opinion as effectively as any pamphlet. But for that popular impact to be felt, Adams had to become but one link in an epistolary chain. While Adams writes the letter, he is not the author of its picaresque travels through a transatlantic printscape. That power is instead borne by each node—the suspected Tory trying to clear his name; the seized ferryboat; Admiral Graves, who sent the correspondence to the British high command in Boston; General Gage, who sent the originals back to the ministry in London; Margaret Draper, who published the letters in her *Massachusetts Gazette*—in an epistolary network far more complex and unpredictable than a simple communication from John to Abigail.

Pinning down the contours of epistolary networks can be difficult, al-

1958); and Corinna Wagner, “Loyalist Propaganda and the Scandalous Life of Tom Paine,” *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 28 (Mar. 2005): 97–115.

38. Adams, *The Life of John Adams*, 1:179 and *Diary, with Passages from an Autobiography*, in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, 2: 411; hereafter abbreviated *D*.

39. Quoted in “Genuine Copies of the Intercepted Letters Mentioned in Our Last,” *Massachusetts Gazette and Boston Weekly News-Letter*, 17 Aug. 1775.

though in the Atlantic world access to heavily taxed commodities such as paper and stamps as well as more intangible resources like leisure time to cultivate literacy gave printscapes some rather clear boundaries. Both diplomatic circles and the patrician world of polite republican exchange that Adams participated in demanded sizable degrees of refinement, to say nothing of the rudiments of literacy that were denied many women, slaves, and working-class persons. Although the republic of letters created possibilities for people to enter the public sphere as faceless and depersonalized actors, in the realities of eighteenth-century writing and print the markers of identity were quickly uploaded by a network that privileged white masculinity and those owning property. This world contrasts starkly with views that see contemporary networks as porous and unstoppable. “Literally there is nothing but networks, there is nothing in between them,” writes Bruno Latour.⁴⁰ By getting rid of the “between,” Latour refuses standard geographies of social space that assume stable centers or fixed points. Instead there remain only continuous connections that refuse centralization so that what becomes important are not individual webpages but the links that direct users from one internet site to another, not strong friendships but the weak personal associations that expand social worlds, not commodities like a single laptop but the interconnectivity of multiple computers that makes them useful and valuable. And so we might add: not the packet of confidential correspondence that Hitchborn ineptly carried on behalf of Adams but the wider net of a printscape that amplified and widened the notion of American independence expressed in the intercepted letters. In this way, dissemination emerges as propaganda’s most important content.

3

The network of colonial correspondence maintained by inkwells, quill pens, and couriers no doubt lacks the complexity and sophistication of WikiLeaks. But the routes and relays exploited by American propagandists also often lacked the accretions of personality and celebrity that have emerged from the critical commentary over Cablegate. As a network phenomenon, WikiLeaks also reassembles not the social, as Latour would have

40. Latour, “On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications,” 11 Jan. 1998, www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-1-9801/msg00019.html. But networks also have their exclusions. For a critique of Latour on this point, see Sianne Ngai, “Network Aesthetics: Juliana Spahr’s *The Transformation* and Bruno Latour’s *Reassembling the Social*,” in *American Literature’s Aesthetic Dimensions*, ed. Christopher Looby and Cindy Weinstein (New York, 2012).

it, but the subject.⁴¹ Unlike observers of WikiLeaks who peg content to familiar signs of identity, Ben Franklin tried to diminish his agency, at least temporarily, so as not to impede the flow of propaganda. Surely, though, Franklin was as much a rock star in his day as Assange is in ours, making him every bit if not more of an identifiable node as Assange, his agency amplified by the epistolary, scientific, and diplomatic networks of the Atlantic revolutionary world. It is for this reason that Franklin's unburdening himself of identity represents a crucial juncture in the transit of Anglo-American correspondence.

In 1773, the letters of Thomas Hutchinson, royal governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, were leaked to the American press and touched off a public relations nightmare for the British Empire. No stranger to colonial conflict, Hutchinson had narrowly escaped a mob that ransacked his mansion during the Stamp Act crisis in 1765. But this scrape little prepared him for the public relations fiasco that would erupt when copies of letters he sent to a London minister, after laying dormant for a number of years, were surreptitiously conveyed to the Sons of Liberty. Once-innocuous private reflections on the colonial crisis became a public liability when retransmitted and propagated across correspondence networks. In their dispersion across the printscape, Governor Hutchinson's handwritten epistles changed form—and meaning—when they were typeset in newspaper columns and later circulated as a pamphlet. In the eyes of American radicals, the publication of the governor's correspondence revealed evidence of the attack on liberty that British authorities had been covertly planning all along.

Mystery still surrounds the means by which these letters were sucked into the wider currents of transatlantic epistolarity. Hutchinson's correspondent, Thomas Whately, could not clear up the mystery of who had stolen the letters since he had died the previous year. In an attempt to resolve matters, the deceased's brother challenged to a duel the man whom rumor identified as the culprit. On the field of honor, as it was called, Whately's brother was wounded and a second duel seemed imminent after charges of an unfair swordfight carried over from the first contest. At this point, Franklin spoke up in the London press and revealed his role in channeling the letters to Massachusetts, an act, he claimed, committed

41. Latour highlights the associations and connections that dilute the socius; see Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p. 5. Critics have argued that actor-network-theory, despite emphasizing links and relays, remains committed to identity under the sign of a "distributed actor" and "thereby reverting to a subject who is invisible and autonomous" (Hélène Miale, "Reincarnating the Knowing Subject: Scientific Rationality and the Situated Body," *Qui Parle* 18 [Fall–Winter 2009]: 61).

with the best intentions and certainly not with an eye toward publication. Franklin, however, never revealed who had rifled through a dead man's papers and forwarded the politically sensitive but private letters to him.

For Hutchinson, the fallout was nothing as dangerous as swords and pistols at dawn. But the consequences were nonetheless severe, as his reputation and ability to govern a colony suffered an irreparable blow. By the end of the affair he would leave Massachusetts, his native land, for England, where he asked the ministry to replace him; his effectiveness, he believed, as colonial governor had come to an unceremonious end. What had Hutchinson written to ignite such controversy? Not all that much, according to historians. Back in 1768–69, Hutchinson sent a packet of correspondence to England that laid out his take on American affairs. Hutchinson's communiqués, in particular, show restraint, an attitude consistent with his previous efforts to defuse the heated animosity and suspicion that tainted Anglo-American relations. For Hutchinson's biographer, the governor is a tragically misunderstood figure who was powerless to stop the patriot propaganda machine once it made him its target. Hutchinson's confidential letters "were mild as mother's milk," according to one nineteenth-century historian's metaphor.⁴² This perspective of the Hutchinson affair has generally prevailed, and readers such as Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood have sought to explain how the governor's intended meaning so quickly got away from him. But the issue is not and likely never was simply confined to the content of the letters. The more crucial factor is their dissemination.

Colonists latched onto a single phrase embedded in a letter of 20 January 1769: "There must be an abridgement of what are called English liberties."⁴³ These eleven words spread through the Whig press and from colony to colony at a steady pace. The content of the letters paled in comparison to the scandal of their circulation. First printed in the *Massachusetts Spy* from 9–17 June 1773, they had been printed in full in South Carolina. A pamphlet version soon followed, and, by December, ten different printings were circulating in both North America and England. Yet just as many Whig-leaning newspapers refrained from typesetting the letters not out of delicacy but so they could cut to the chase and denounce the governor without wasting time on the incriminating details. The true sensation was not

42. James K. Hosmer, *The Life of Thomas Hutchinson: Royal Governor of the Province of Massachusetts Bay* (1896; New York, 1972), p. 278.

43. Thomas Hutchinson, letter to Whately, 20 Jan. 1769, in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. William Willcox et al., 40 vols. (New Haven, Conn., 1959–2011), 20:550.

merely the facts *in* the stolen letters but rather the fact *of* their existence, a secret that had now been disclosed and circulated across the printscape.⁴⁴

In his capacity as deputy postmaster general of North America, Franklin received the letters, which came with the express proviso that the letters not be copied or, even worse, printed and circulated, and leaked them, and, as Franklin likely anticipated, the Boston Committee of Correspondence, with Sam Adams at its helm, arranged for printers to typeset and bind the letters into a pamphlet. Debates over Franklin's intentions continue to this day.⁴⁵ But his intentions are beside the point. Focusing on his agency obscures his mobile location along a web of transatlantic epistolary connections. Of course, Franklin is not just any relay; his reputation as a philosopher, diplomat, inventor, and printer make it clear that he is just the sort of hub through whom sensitive letters would pass. But this dignified reputation—some of it invented by Franklin himself and the rest repeated by biographers—fixates upon individual achievement while ignoring the conduits that enable information and rumor to spread. When networks come into view, “the social actor of traditional social theory is not on the agenda. . . . Actors are not conceived of as fixed entities but as flows,” argues Latour.⁴⁶ Instead of actors, the emphasis is upon action, which flows through nodes, and Franklin, by virtue of his connections and his reputation as the most famous American of his era, was an especially rich node for creating still more connections.⁴⁷ Conventional

44. See Thomas R. Adams, *American Independence: The Growth of an Idea: A Bibliographical Study of the American Political Pamphlets Printed between 1764 and 1776 Dealing with the Dispute between Great Britain and Her Colonies* (Providence, 1965), pp. 72–74, and Thomas C. Leonard, “News for a Revolution: The Exposé in America, 1768–1773,” *Journal of American History* 67 (June 1980): 35.

45. No stranger to the world of printing shops, Franklin no doubt knew what would happen when the letters turned up in Boston. In a posthumously published pamphlet, “Tract Relative to the Affair of Hutchinson's Letters,” Franklin claimed that he only engaged in this ethically suspect act of transmitting purloined letters out of the purest motive. If people could see that the scheming against American liberty and adoption of punitive trade policies emanated, not from the Crown, but from men like Hutchinson in their midst, then colonial resentment would find its proper target. Yet if Franklin truly believed that limited circulation of this correspondence could improve Anglo-American relations, why then did he also think that their disclosure would likely incite riot? The contradiction speaks either to his cageyness, as the editor of his collected papers suggests, or it reveals his startling naiveté, as Gordon Wood has concluded. Compare the editors' assessment in Franklin, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 20:408n to Gordon Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin* (New York, 2004), p. 143.

46. Latour, “On Actor-Network Theory.” See also his reconsideration of action in Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, p. 44.

47. According to Laura Rigal, Franklin moved within a “multinational network of correspondents” that anticipated digital communication (Laura Rigal, “Benjamin Franklin, the Science of Flow, and the Legacy of the Enlightenment,” in *A Companion to Benjamin Franklin*, ed. David Waldstreicher [New York, 2011], p. 311). The context of Newtonian physics, especially

understandings of identity are inadequate for mapping networks, whether it is a heavily visited website or the conduits of letter writing. We might instead view Franklin as a sort of hyperlink that facilitates the transmission of information—much of it unauthorized—across the complex network of Britain and its North American colonies.

This printscape furnished Franklin the opportunity to deploy his fictional personae such as Poor Richard, Count De Schaumberg, or the more generic “a correspondent.” By Wood’s count, Franklin used at least forty-two different pseudonyms during his residence in London.⁴⁸ This excess of subjectivity is also its strategic attenuation. Authorship gets lost in the shuffle of rhetorical masks that variously echo one another in ways that partially anticipate how internet mirroring sites provide exact copies of sensitive information in the event that the original site is blocked or denied service. Yet this array of personae, thanks to the diligent efforts of editors and archivists, represents a merely temporary deferral of identity since all these textual roads eventually lead back to the historic figure of Franklin. The full revolutionary import of the Hutchinson affair instead consists in Franklin’s relinquishing of subjectivity so that what stands forth is not a personality or even an individual but the printscape itself. He empties himself out to increase the bandwidth of information (as well as innuendo and accusation) that flows through his agency. As any good horticulturalist knows, the defining feature of propagation is not the original plant that sends out shoots but rather the entire ground that supports and replicates the species. So, too, for the propagator of ideas and information: it is not identity that takes center stage (here one might imagine *Time* magazine, if it existed in the eighteenth century, putting Ben Franklin on its cover as “person of the year” for 1773) but rather the networked flow of secrets that stretch across the Atlantic. Most crucially, though, there is no center stage since the deepest political charge lies spread out across the background with its hum of ideas in which no single actor seems distinguishable.

In his account of the role he played in the Hutchinson affair, Franklin chose not to enact any one of his scores of avatars but took a more radical course by minimizing his own agency altogether. “When I see that all petitions and complaints of grievances are so odious to government, that

early understandings of fluid dynamics, drew Franklin and his peers to investigations of the relationship between complex systems ranging from natural science to economy.

48. See Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*, p. 42, and see also Todd Thompson on Franklin’s use of personae early in his career in “Representative Nobodies: The Politics of Benjamin Franklin’s Satiric Personae, 1722–1757,” *Early American Literature* 46 (Winter 2011): 449–80.

even the mere pipe which conveys them becomes obnoxious, I am at a loss to know how peace and union is to be maintained or restored between the different parts of the empire," he wrote, still smarting from the blows his reputation suffered from his involvement in the Hutchinson affair.⁴⁹ Parliament rebuked Franklin personally for the role he played in transmitting the ill-gotten private letters back to America. Casting himself as a "mere pipe," Franklin downplays the charge that he has stirred up trouble between the colonies and England. But if we take him at his word—always a risky proposition when dealing with this early American ironist—then it also appears that a real but incalculable threat lies in the possibility that a person, without exercising any particular volition or agency, can relay political critique. Anyone could be a node of transmission, everyone a spreader of information. Even the innocent among us, Franklin seems to be saying, is a potential propagandist. Keeping with the terms of Franklin's metaphor, we might say that smoke is only a danger sign and that the true menace is the seemingly inert mechanism—the "mere pipe"—that transmits it. Not all pipes are for smoking, and it is likely that Franklin also intended to invoke a musical wind pipe, which here seems to make noise independently of any player.

In locating himself along the epistolary connections that broke the seal upon the Hutchinson letters and returned them to Boston, Franklin cast himself as but one link in an extended chain of correspondence. He claimed never to have authorized publication of the letters. His protestation of innocence was more than self-serving. In a perhaps uncharacteristic move, Franklin refuses to occupy the center, instead preferring to sit back in the shadows where, after all, the shadowy work of espionage gets done. The diminishment of agency supplies a tactical advantage. Writing from London in July 1773, he explained that the "great Reason of forbidding their Publication, was an Apprehension that it might put all the possessors of such Correspondence here upon their Guard, and so prevent the obtaining of more of it." Channels of transatlantic correspondence, Franklin warns, could become clogged with precaution and slowed down if the network becomes too public. Rather than focusing on any single node—such as himself—Franklin advised that colonial propagandists take heart from the diffused nature of the network itself. Despite its private nature, Hutchinson's treachery in undermining Anglo-American relations will "spread thro' the Province" since in their networked form his personal letters radiate outward from each member of the committee of correspon-

49. Franklin, letter to Thomas Cushing, London, 15 [—19?] Jan. 1774, in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 21:93–94.

dence who, courtesy of Franklin, gained access to the originals. This interlocking set of links exposes the perfidy of Hutchinson and his cabal and “demolish[es] effectually their Interest and Influence” more thoroughly than the action of an isolated whistleblower.⁵⁰ Propaganda flows unchecked if it can avoid being gummed up with individuality.

The impossibility of pinning down a sprawling correspondence network perhaps explains why the British ministry singled out Franklin. London officials took pains to publicly humiliate the colonial agent for Massachusetts by pinning the entire blame for the scandal upon him. On 29 January 1774, the Privy Council summoned Franklin to a hearing to consider the colony’s petition that the governor and lieutenant governor be recalled. Only nine days before, however, news of the Boston Tea Party had reached London to provide seeming confirmation that Americans respected neither property nor sovereign authority. Why should they be any less scheming and lawless when it came to dealing with a gentleman’s letters? Jeers greeted Franklin as he walked into the council chamber, at one time an arena for cockfighting, known appropriately enough as the Cockpit. Echoes of the building’s former uses were not lost upon Franklin, who likened the scene to a “Bull-baiting” and noted that “all the courtiers were invited as to an entertainment.”⁵¹ For over an hour, Franklin sat silent as the solicitor general, Alexander Wedderburn, excoriated him for violating an unwritten gentlemanly code by trafficking in stolen letters. The attack confirmed what Franklin had suspected all along, namely, that government officials would now exercise vigilance over their correspondence lest it, too, be intercepted as fodder for a public propaganda campaign. Once the world learns of Franklin’s trespass, “men will watch him with a jealous eye; they will hide their papers from him, and lock up the escritaires,” charged Wedderburn, calling upon government officers to exercise greater control over the epistolary traffic that Franklin had so shrewdly exploited.⁵²

In his speech at the Cockpit, Solicitor General Wedderburn invoked another kind of traffic—the slave trade—in order to check the freedom that Franklin enjoyed as a conduit in a dishonorable correspondence network that propagated American opposition to British policies. Alluding to

50. Franklin, letter to Samuel Cooper, 7 July 1773, in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 20: 270, 271.

51. Franklin, “Extract of a Letter from London,” 19 Feb. 1774, in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 21:112 and letter to Cushing, 15 [—19?] Feb. 1774, in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 21:92.

52. Alexander Wedderburn, “Wedderburn’s Speech before the Privy Council London,” in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 21:49; hereafter abbreviated “WS.”

Edward Young's *The Revenge* (1721), a tragedy about forgery and deception, Wedderburn racializes Franklin by comparing his role in the Hutchinson affair to that of Zanga, "the captive Moor," of the play. To appreciate the extent of Franklin's culpability, Wedderburn quoted the following lines spoken by Zanga as he gleefully reveals how he has manipulated the flow of correspondence to exact his revenge:

Know then 'twas—I
 I forg'd the letter—I
 Dispos'd the picture—
 I hated, I despis'd, and I
 Destroy.

[“WS,” p. 50]⁵³

While it is bad enough that Franklin has acted like Zanga, his guilt is compounded by the fact that his villainy is itself but a copy, a plagiarism of the black slave's behavior. In a London pamphlet that circulated a version of—and made some adjustments to—the scene at the Cockpit, Wedderburn is reported to have prefaced these lines by saying that “what poetic fiction only had penned for the *breast* of a cruel African, Dr. Franklin has realized, and transcribed from his *own*. His too is the language of a Zanga.” Not only has Franklin disregarded the prohibition against copying the letters, but he has also copied or “transcribed” immorality from his own inwardness, which is presumably as savage as the resentment lurking within a faithless African slave. In the more official version of events preferred by the editors of Franklin's papers, Wedderburn simply asks the Privy Council if “the wily American” is not like “the bloody African” (“WS,” pp. 49–50, 50n). The allusion to Zanga is more than a flourish; it is a move to locate, personalize, and restrict the diffused system of transatlantic correspondence. Here is the guilty party: Ben Franklin, the most respected American of the era, not some diffused assemblage of intimates, correspondents, and printers, which would surely be more worrisome. The reference to Zanga converts the now very public Hutchinson affair into a matter of interiority so that it appears as nothing more than the visible symptom of Franklin's scheming, “black” character. Confronted with the sprawling nature of correspondence networks, the ministry responded by singling out the agent for the colony, reverting to a narrative of

53. The original of the play has slightly different wording and punctuation; see Edward Young, *The Revenge, a Tragedy As It Is Acted at the Theatre-Royal in Drury-Lane* (London, 1721), p. 59. Wedderburn also took pains to emphasize Franklin's corporeality in order to simplify the network situation. On this point, see Warner, *Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), p. 93.

“binary enmity,” to use Jagoda’s terms, that simplifies “network antagonisms.”⁵⁴ The fantasy is that the propagation of revolutionary material emanates from a lone agent and not a public interlinked and excited by expressions of dissent. Attributing malice to Franklin is, above all, an attribution of identity, which acts as a drag upon the propagations of an Atlantic epistolary network.

While this network lacks electronic drop boxes, what it most lacks are cumbersome accretions of personality—the brilliant hacktivist, the cyberterrorist, the digital defender of free speech—that the network phenomenon of WikiLeaks engenders and sustains. Networks, it seems, can produce not just connections but also identities that interrupt an otherwise undifferentiated dimension of links. Latour proposes that within networks “actors are not conceived as fixed entities but as flows” in order to multiply the possibilities for action.⁵⁵ Yet this emphasis on total connection can “end up seemingly oddly anticonnexionist,” as Sianne Ngai writes, because it envisions a host of individual actors, each supreme in its separate hub or node.⁵⁶ If networks thus facilitate the reemergence of individualism, then surely Franklin, as perhaps the preeminent individual of the eighteenth century, would seem to confirm this counterintuitive lesson of networks. But as a propagandist, his temporary evacuation of identity also removes a major obstacle to the continued spread of seditious communications. By disabling, however momentarily, the linkage between democratic practices and his own liberal identity, Franklin essayed to propagate revolution far more widely than he ever could by individual action.

If the scene of public censure at the Cockpit was part blood sport and part theater, Franklin would neither take the bait nor play to the audience. He listened without protest or objection as the gallery applauded and laughed in response to Wedderburn’s speech, although by one account Franklin did break his silence when he left the chamber by whispering to Wedderburn, “I will make your master a LITTLE KING for this.”⁵⁷ What appears more certain is that Franklin, adopting the persona of a Londoner shocked by the Privy Council’s behavior, sent a letter to the *Pennsylvania Gazette* that explains the attack on the good doctor as motivated by the ministry’s annoyance over communications that it could not control. From behind the screen of epistolary imposture, Franklin vacates his specific identity to claim the generic status of a “Public Messenger” who facilitates communication indiscriminately, without regard to regions,

54. Jagoda, “Terror Networks,” p. 67.

55. Latour, “On Actor-Network Theory.”

56. Ngai, “Network Aesthetics,” p. 377.

57. Quoted in Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin*, p. 147.

custom, or the niceties of confidentiality. The correspondent expresses embarrassment that among the thirty-five lords at the Cockpit “not one of them had the Sense to reflect on the Impropriety and Indecency of treating, in so ignominious a Manner, a Public Messenger, whose character in all Nations, savage as well as civilized, used to be deemed sacred.”⁵⁸ Like Franklin’s self-representation as a “mere pipe,” the sentiment here runs toward the notion that the propagation of information is potentially more volatile than information itself or the agents who set it in motion.

Unlike the fallout from WikiLeaks that casts Assange as villain and Manning as victim, Franklin would not cop to either role. The ministry certainly tried to paint him as a black villain, though national mythology idolizes him as the cagey progenitor of liberty along with liberal individualism. No stranger to the self-divisions created by what Warner calls his “untempered pursuit of print negativity,” Franklin sought to keep both his private self and many public personae out of the affair.⁵⁹ Only later did he seek to settle the matter in a tract, but it was an account that he abandoned and never published during his lifetime, which is where the uncertain movements of the printscape take over. The “Tract Relative to the Affair of Hutchinson’s Letters” exists only as a draft with two copies, one mutilated and the other missing pages. The copies are not in Franklin’s handwriting and the surviving texts, his editors surmise, stem from Franklin’s now-lost transcriptions of the revised original draft. “Which text is the most authoritative[?]” his editors ask.⁶⁰ It is a question engendered and at the same time made unanswerable by the mobility of textual copying, transmission, and circulation. This hardly definitive document comes to light only posthumously, that is, after the human has entered the ground and “the person” sinks back into the very networks of print and propaganda that first produced it.

The day after the show trial in the Cockpit, Franklin received notice that his services as deputy postmaster general of North America would no longer be needed. Still, the damage had already been done, and the stream of propaganda did not come to an end with Franklin’s dismissal. The epistolary network, while neither secure nor dependable, had made identity, to a certain extent, superfluous. Or rather identity had been diffused along a

58. Franklin, “Extract of a Letter from a Gentleman in London,” *Pennsylvania Gazette*, 20 Apr. 1774, p. 3. The claim upon “public messenger” is short lived, however. The letter concludes by surmising that Franklin became a target not because of the Hutchinson affair but because certain satirical pamphlets (“Rules by Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One” and “An Edict by the King of Prussia”) “are suspected to be his” (p. 3)—which indeed they are.

59. Warner, *Letters of the Republic*, p. 96.

60. Editors’ introduction to “Tract Relative to the Affair of Hutchinson’s Letters,” in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 21:415.

communication network while decoupling, if only temporarily, transatlantic republicanism from more traditional understandings of identity. Likewise, Manning only wants to be a link. In a chat room exchange that eventually led to his arrest and detention, he typed that he does not want to be associated with WikiLeaks, especially Assange. "I just want the material out there. I don't want to be part of it." Manning, as Franklin might view the situation, sees himself as a "Public Messenger." Of course, Manning now has been identified as the crucial link in the dissemination of secret state and military information, and, until recently, he had been held in solitary confinement for twenty-three hours a day, denied even the most basic physical freedom to move or sleep when he wanted to. As of this writing, he is on trial.