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ISLANDS OF FREEDOM: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, WIKILEAKS, AND THE ARCHIVE IMAGINARY

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On December 3, 2010, the Library of Congress¹ confirmed on its blog that it had blocked Wikileaks from all of its internal servers, banning the site across the entirety of its computer systems and disallowing access to the site and its archives within the walls of the LC's main reading rooms. In an official statement, the library's then Director of Communications, Matt Raymond, insisted that the library was legally obligated to protect all classified government information, despite any unauthorized public release to which the information might have been subject. The decision to block the website was made in the wake of a series of releases from Wikileaks, including more than 250,000 classified State Department cables and the additional release of 6,500 quasi-secret reports produced by the Congressional Research Service, a subbranch of the LC meant to serve the needs of the United States Congress. Government employees and patrons of the library's reading rooms, eager to stay up to date on the rapidly unfolding maelstrom of media and governmental responses to the cable releases, were greeted with the following message upon trying to access Wikileaks:

Ad or Website blocked by LC DNSBH. Advertisements or websites that may be malicious are blocked. If this message appears in lieu of an advertisement (i.e. on part of the page), the advertisement site may be malicious. However the website is safe to use. If this message appears on a page by itself, the website is blocked due to potential malicious content. More information - LC IT Security (Gawker 2010)

While all government institutions have pledged, in some capacity, to serve the public good; none have developed the same historical obligation as the LC to establish a *universal library* which is free and open to the public. Not only that, but the Library of Congress has spent most of the last two and half decades seeking to move fully into the information age, and to establish a universal digital archive which might one day provide every single piece of information in existence to all citizens of the United States, and even other citizens of the UN community. This goal has been established historically, through the library's continual archiving of every bit of information to which it assigns a copyright—but also through the leadership of the current National Librarian, James

¹ hereafter referred to as LC

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Billington, who has tirelessly worked to guide the LC into the 21st century. Billington has been one of the nation's most enthusiastic cheerleaders when it comes to the development of, as he's called it, the "World Digital Library," which he thinks of as a global democratic project meant to bridge the interests of the United States, UNESCO, and Google (the first major donor to the WDL project). In a 2005 editorial for the Washington Post, Billington conceptualized the WDL thusly:

Libraries are inherently islands of freedom and antidotes to fanaticism. They are temples of pluralism where books that contradict one another stand peacefully side by side just as intellectual antagonists work peacefully next to each other in reading rooms.

(Billington 2005)

The inherent nature of the "island of freedom" would seem to make such an act of censorship, not only undesirable, but close to impossible for the Library of Congress. And yet, the very particular word choice in this passage gives us clues as to how Billington is conceptualizing this particular freedom. Through the accumulation of texts, a library prevents fanaticism. In Billington's framework, an archive provides us with the proof that no single viewpoint can be totally correct in its political convictions, thus providing a historical metaphor which deemphasizes any point of view which strays too far from discursive norms. However, one can see that the conceptualization of the publicly-accessible national archive leaves very little room for revolutionary literature, and even less for revolutionary literature of questionable legal status. Billington may be right that libraries tend towards "freedom", but the Library of Congress is no ordinary library. It is a national library with national interests, seeking to serve the "public" only in a capacity secondary to its service to the national legislature. As their mission statement makes clear: "The Library's mission is to support the Congress in fulfilling its constitutional duties and to further the progress of knowledge and creativity for the benefit of the American people". In furthering the progress of knowledge, the library has articulated its need to create a comprehensive record of American history, but only after it has served the needs of the Congress. Wikileaks seems to bring these interests into conflict, and it is perhaps not so surprising that they chose to side with governmentality over the desire to catalog important information.

And yet, it's the peculiarly *ineffective* means of censorship that they chose that interests me most. Patrons of the library need only to pull out their smart phones to gain access to Wikileaks documents within the walls of the Jefferson reading room. Federal employees can access the documents from home, and, even if it were effective, the ban would only succeed in guaranteeing that those working for the LC and other branches of the federal government are less informed than members of the general public. In fact, the LC went even further than the initial network-wide ban, later labeling books *about* Wikileaks with a CiP² keyword of "Extremist Website", a cataloging label ordinarily reserved for books about white nationalism or jihadist groups. So why did the library ban Wikileaks? I believe the answer to these questions has to do with competing definitions of the public-ness, a concern which is shared by both Wikileaks and the Library of Congress to negotiate the competing ideological demands of both *archive* and *nation*, two metaphorical imaginaries with overlapping but divergent ideologies. The LC's

² cataloging-in-publication

disciplinary action, therefore, is an attempt to claim publicity in the service of its own nationalist archive, and to discredit the claims to public good represented by Wikileaks. The heart of this paper will be a comparative close reading of two specific digital archives, curated respectively by the Library of Congress and Wikileaks. Both of these archives imagine a certain type of public engagement, and position their users in relation to a body of information that prefigures democratic action. To elucidate the conflict between these parallel discursive projects, I will call upon Habermasian conceptions of the public sphere as well as a variety of post-structuralist theory related to “archives” and their potential democratic effects, eventually demonstrating through this example the larger conflicts related to governmentality and digital archives in the age of networked information.

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