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Protest Panama Papers

The Panama Papers: leaktivism's coming of age

The theory that leaking information is an effective form of social protest is being put to the test like never before. It could give rise to capitalism's greatest crisis yet





'The fundamental problem that the Panama Papers brings to light is a question of global governance: the wrong people are in power.' Photograph: Bragi Kort / Barcroft Media

Micah White, co-founder of Occupy

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From an activist perspective, the importance of the [Panama Papers](#) goes far beyond confirming what the 99% already suspected. Yes, this gigantic leak provides more irrefutable evidence than ever that many among the global political elite – the 1% – probably deserve to be in jail (while paying their overdue taxes), not governing our world. But that is not surprising news to many people. The real significance of the Panama Papers is what the massive leak means for the possibility of social change.

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The Panama Papers represents the coming-of-age of leaktivism. This is the activist theory, most famously promoted by WikiLeaks, that leaking truthful information is an effective form of social protest. Of course, this isn't a new idea – “you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” ([John 8:32](#)) – but with the rise of global whistleblower activists like

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Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden, leaking has become an increasingly celebrated tactic of contemporary activism.

This is a unique opportunity to test the effectiveness of leaktivism. The Panama Papers is arguably the perfect leak. First of all, the size is sublime: over 40 years of records, 11.5m files and 2.6 terabytes of data from the world's fourth largest offshore law firm. This is a full leak, a leak that dwarfs all previous leaks in human history. Second, the Panama Papers are being dissected via an unprecedented collaboration between hundreds of highly credible international journalists who have been working secretly for a year. This is the global professionalization of leaktivism. The days of WikiLeaks amateurism are over.

So will the Panama Papers actually result in positive social change?

There is reason to believe that mass demonstrations will spread to many more countries

Clearly, they have the potential to inspire street protests. Already in Iceland, Prime Minister Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson, who was implicated along with his wife in the files, has been [forced to resign](#) after more than 10,000 angry protesters flocked to parliament. And given that the papers contain information on 143 politicians, [including](#) Russia's president, Pakistan's prime minister, the president of Ukraine, Argentina's president, the king of Saudi Arabia, six members of the UK's House of Lords, eight families associated with the

supreme ruling body in China and dozens of Brazilians, there is reason to believe that mass demonstrations will spread to many more countries.

The immediate consequence of the Panama Papers may be the destabilizing effect it has on governments worldwide. Many of the most powerful leaders may lose their legitimacy in the days to come. As Rana Foroohar put it in an [editorial for Time magazine](#), "The Panama Papers could lead to capitalism's greatest crisis."

But there is a fundamental difference between crisis and social change. After all, crisis seems to be an essential part of capitalism's nature. The resignation of a handful of politicians may let off some steam, but it doesn't solve the core problem: our world is being mismanaged by the hypocritical 1%.

So let's pause for a moment of critical reflection before rushing to join the chorus that believes a big leak and big protests will necessarily result in big change.

Why the Panama Papers should be a US election issue

After all, shouldn't we be jaded, or at least a tiny bit skeptical, about the potential of leaktivism to change the world? Haven't we seen massive information



dumps from WikiLeaks and Edward Snowden come and go without shifting the status quo? And haven't we watched the rich and powerful stay where they are after protesters in 82 countries occupied financial districts in 2011 with the demand "get money out of politics"? Yes, yes and yes.

The proper lesson to draw from these past failures isn't that we should give up, or stop protesting, but instead that the people must break the script of activism and protest differently this time. Here's what that could look like.

The beauty of the Panama Papers is that the leak makes it abundantly clear that the people in every country face the same globalized enemy. It does not matter if you live in the UK, Brazil, Russia or Pakistan. The truth is the ultra-rich wield their wealth to maintain a stranglehold on power while simultaneously hiding from the taxman.

The fundamental problem that the Panama Papers brings to light is a question of global governance: the wrong people are in power. The only way the 99% is going to solve that deeper problem is if a social movement arises that is willing to use protest to swing elections in multiple countries in order to take power and govern the world. The release of the Panama Papers will be a success if it brings us even just one step closer to realizing that higher goal.

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