

Secrecy is the problem, not leakers: Wikileaks on the global stage

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2011/01/03/secrecy-is-the-problem-not-leakers-wikileaks-on-the-global-stage/

2011-1-3

Wikileaks is now at the centre of a global battle between media and those in power but what's the value of what Julian Assange is doing? This article was written for the [United Nation's Global Expert Finder website](#), part of the UN's [Alliance of Civilisations](#). It sets out how Wikileaks is much more than just another journalistic scandal, it is a challenge to the way that power and news media operate in the Internet Age.



In some ways Wikileaks is a traditional investigative news operation. It gets its information from a source and the journalists decide what they will publish. It needs a platform, an audience and revenue just like any other newsroom. It can also be sued, censored or attacked. But because it is trying to operate online outside of normal national jurisdictions it is harder to hold to account.

It can use mirror sites and multiple servers to avoid physical restraint. It also disseminates data on such a vast scale and directly to the public so it is posing a different threat to those in authority used to being able to influence if not control the media. It is independent and not run for profit and the people who work for it are ideologically motivated. This all makes it much harder to clamp down.

Oxford University Internet analyst [John Naughton says](#) that:

“What WikiLeaks is really exposing is the extent to which the western democratic system has been hollowed out.”

It is not that what it publishes will endanger lives or make government impossible. It is that it forces power out into the open. That is why those in power are attacking it. Wikileaks worries them because it protects its sources and gives the evidence directly and in great detail and scale to the citizen.

It is also a challenge to mainstream media. As Columbia University digital journalism expert [Emily Bell argues](#):

“It forces journalists and news organisations to demonstrate to what extent they are now part of an establishment it is their duty to report.”

In other words, Wikileaks exposes the degree to which 'normal' journalism has lost its watchdog role.

Mainstream journalism stands accused of failing to be critical enough of those in authority. Over the economic crash of 2007 and over Intelligence and the Iraq War, it failed to challenge the conventional wisdom. It was not a conspiracy or a failure of resource. It was because journalism can be too responsible, balanced and passive. Sometimes journalism needs to be disruptive, critical and even partial.

No-one denies that what Wikileaks has revealed about the Iraq War or the Diplomatic cables is true. It is important because it has revealed specific abuses such as the collateral damage video of US military executing civilians. But the latest release of diplomatic communications are even more significant because they show how power works, not just what it does. It gives an insight into the values, priorities and knowledge of authority that helps us to make much

better-informed judgements of what those in power actually do. Surely, that is precisely what journalism is for?

It is encouraging to see how Wikileaks is now working with mainstream news media organisations on their latest stories. It is good that the expertise within those newsrooms can be used to help filter, explain and contextualise the raw data. It can then be presented in a way that allows for proper responses by the authorities and the public. That kind of interaction is exactly what should happen over these issues, not the knee-jerk attempt to kill the messenger. Instead of blocking access to websites and hiding behind firewalls it would be sensible for those in power to consider a more mature and transparent relationship with their citizens.

Of course, some of these revelations may compromise safety and security. There should always be limits on free expression. Responsibility comes with rights for the journalist. However, even when it is damaging, disclosure should always be welcomed. It's why it's the *First* Amendment.

The danger is that we are now heading towards a future where governments from Beijing to Washington will welcome more controls on the Internet. This would then limit the power of the most liberating technology the world has seen since the invention of printing itself. It would be naïve to expect those in power to embrace radical accountability. So we need to fight for transparency and embrace the opportunity that initiatives like Wikileaks represent. I recognise that Wikileaks is not itself entirely transparent but I think that it is becoming more so and other better versions will follow. The real problem in the world is secrecy not leakers.

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science