

Polis – Wicked Wikis?

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2008/02/19/wicked-wikis/

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An international [website](#) devoted to exposing corporate wrong-doing is facing legal action which may prevent its whistle-blowing. Is this censorship or a vital control on Internet speculation?

[[update March 2008: Wikileaks won on appeal so is safe-ish for now](#)]

[Wikileaks](#) said it was: “developing an uncensorable system for untraceable mass document leaking and public analysis”.

Well, not any more it ain't. Lawyers for Swiss Bank have effectively shut it down while Wikileaks pleads the First Amendment.

Anyone who knows the history of investigative journalism knows that exposing the ill-doings of major institutions often involves some editorial practices that stray in to gray ethical areas. Leaking a document is almost by definition a transgression of your terms of employment and for the journalist, it is never far from receiving stolen goods. But even courts in the UK have tended to accept the argument of ‘public interest’ but it can still be hazardous as civil servants [David Keogh and Leo O'Connor](#) found.

Legally, there is no difference in leaking online. The fact is publication, it doesn't matter where you do it. In practice, the Internet and email has added greatly to the potential (and complexity) of investigative reporting. The [Guardian's BAE Files](#) for example is a wonderful repository of detail and resources for anyone interested in the story of alleged Saudi corruption involved in British arms sales. Techniques such as crowd-sourcing allow journalists to gather information in a way that wasn't possible before.

But the real nuggets of revelatory gold tend to come through people making tough and contestable decisions to leak. In the past the dubious nature of these transactions was either glossed over or shrouded in principled talk about the public's right to know.

I think we need all the online help we can get in a world where governments and corporations have great power. But there remains the onus on journalists to investigate as well as publish allegations. That takes skills and time and as [Nick Davies](#) has pointed out recently, both are under pressure.

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