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Why WikiLeaks Changes Everything

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Julian Assange; drawing by John Springs

WikiLeaks changes everything. We can act as if the old standards of journalism still apply to the Internet, but WikiLeaks shows why this is wishful thinking. On November 28 the Internet organization started posting examples from a cache of 251,287 formerly secret US diplomatic cables. The few thousand journalists in this country who regularly track the State Department's doings would have needed a couple of centuries to wheedle out this volume of information by traditional methods; the linkage of disparate

government computer networks (a well-meaning response to the compartmentalization of data in the pre–September 11 period) apparently allowed one disgruntled Army private to pull it off in a few moments. As WikiLeaks itself boasts, this is “the largest set of confidential documents ever to be released into the public domain.”

The scale is unprecedented. So, too, is the intent—or, more precisely, the lack thereof. Raffi Khatchadourian on the *New Yorker* website speculates that the aim of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange “is not to reveal a single act of abuse..., but rather to open up the inner workings of a closed and complex system, to call the world in to help judge its morality.”¹ This may indeed be Assange’s vision, but he doesn’t seem capable of articulating it himself. The WikiLeaks website contends that it’s out to expose “contradictions between the US’s public persona and what it says behind closed doors” (as if a charge of hypocrisy were an adequate reason for exposing official secrets) and informs us that “every American schoolchild is taught that George Washington—the country’s first President—could not tell a lie.”

Among the cables released so far are revelations that have prompted headlines around the world, but there are also dispatches on Bavarian election results and Argentine maritime law. If the aim is to strike a blow against American imperial designs—as Assange has suggested in some of his statements—I don’t see how these particular cables support it. Assange has claimed to *Time* magazine that he wants to “make the world more civil” by making secretive organizations like the US State Department and Department of Defense accountable for their actions; he also told *Time* that, as an alternative, he wants to force them “to lock down internally and to balkanize,” protecting themselves by becoming more opaque and thereby more “closed, conspiratorial and inefficient.” This is, to say the least, a patently contradictory agenda; I’m not sure how we’re supposed to make sense of it. In practical terms it seems to boil down to a policy of disclosure for disclosure’s sake. This is what the technology allows, and Assange has merely followed its lead. I don’t see coherently articulated morality, or immorality, at work here at all; what I see is an amoral, technocratic void.

As Alan Cowell has written in *The New York Times*, the careers of some foreign officials—and not necessarily high-level ones—have already been destroyed or threatened by these revelations.² In at least one case the person's name had been redacted, but his identity was clear enough from the context. One is justified in asking: Will deaths occur as these and other statements are published? We do not know, and we may not hear about them if they do. But damage of various kinds is sure to result. (For his part, Assange seems remarkably unable to discuss these very real dangers; in the *Time* interview he claims that “this sort of nonsense about lives being put into jeopardy” is simply an excuse.) Can WikiLeaks at least tell us why this was necessary?

In the old days, journalists would have done what WikiLeaks's print media partners, like *The Guardian* and *Der Spiegel*, are attempting to do now: make judgments about which documents to release and whether or not to redact the names mentioned in them based on the larger public interest and the risk of inflicting harm on innocent bystanders. Yet one cannot escape the feeling that the entire exercise is rendered tragically moot by the mountain of raw material looming, soon to be equally accessible, in the background. Khatchadourian contends that WikiLeaks is evolving into something more like a conventional journalistic organization, one that will make value judgments about what it's doing rather than simply dumping documents into cyberspace willy-nilly. But the sheer scale of what the group does suggests that this is something of a fool's errand. Assange says the organization has been releasing the cables at the rate of about eighty a day. (By my back-of-the-envelope calculations, that means that we have three thousand days of revelations to go as this article goes to press.)

The comparison some people have been making between the WikiLeaks document dumps and the Pentagon Papers affair back in the 1970s is illuminating precisely because it shows how little the two stories have in common. As pointed out by Max Frankel, an ex-*New York Times* editor who

was one of those overseeing publication of the papers, the leaker in that case, Daniel Ellsberg, was not breaching secrecy for its own sake, unlike the WikiLeaks of today; he was looking to defeat a specific government policy. Moreover, he was acutely conscious of the risks of disclosure and did not distribute documents betraying live diplomatic efforts to negotiate an end to the fighting. And it took him years to find a credible medium of distribution, which is now available at the push of a button.³

I'm fully aware that Daniel Ellsberg has lent his support to Julian Assange. That's his right. But I think he might be overlooking a few vital points. One of the most obvious is that WikiLeaks is posting these raw documents on the Web, the most permissive information medium we have yet to invent. As a result we are now experiencing yet another jump from the ploddingly analog to the explosively digital. Just as the concept of "privacy" fades into obscurity when sixteen-year-olds can present their innermost thoughts to an audience of billions, so, too, the Internet distribution of official secrets changes the rules of the game. Once all the documents are online they will be subjected not only to the often clumsy ministrations of journalists and historians but also to the far more efficient data-mining programs and pattern-analysis software of foreign governments and private companies (the extent of which, in the case of China's handling of Google, the cables themselves make clear). The implications for the conduct of government policy (not to mention individual lives) are monumental. I wish I could predict what they might be, but I can't. I'm not sure anyone can.

The Internet has brought countless benefits to mankind, but as we see now, it also creates incalculable potential for mischief: it amplifies the threats of schoolyard bullies, empowers terrorists and fringe groups, and opens up huge new spaces to technologically savvy criminals. Now that data can be shared, linked, and exploited with near-instantaneous ease, the risks entailed by the publication of information mushroom out of all recognition; there is simply no way that any editor, however well-meaning, can make an informed judgment about the potential repercussions entailed by the release of vast amounts of

confidential data of this sort. But this is where we are, and I wonder whether preaching restraint can have much effect. The technology has outpaced the ethics, and it seems justified to ask whether the ethics can ever catch up again.

Advocates of total information freedom might object that I am overlooking the fact that the tug-of-war between journalists and governments remains a deeply lopsided one. They might contend that government bureaucracies, with their enormous resources and closed cultures, still have far more power to control information than any Julian Assange. The Web's guerrilla leakers are merely trying to even the playing field. I do have some sympathy with this argument. The WikiLeaks revelation that the State Department urged its employees to collect biometric data on foreign diplomats serving at the United Nations, while chilling, confirms what we already knew: that the modern-day national security state has at its disposal information technologies and resources that enable it to map our lives with a precision and power that will be extremely difficult to constrain by the rule of law. (Indeed, I may be particularly sensitive to this fact, since I'm one of the few American citizens to have had my biometric data recorded by the US government; that was a precondition for receiving a press card during my last visit to Iraq. I am allowed to be skeptical, I think, about whether the Department of Defense deleted this information when my accreditation ran out.)

So, yes, journalists should certainly strive to prevent abuses of the culture of secrecy. To some extent, of course, the United States still offers plenty of room for precisely that by allowing for the possibility of political competition and public accountability—including disclosure of secret documents through the Freedom of Information Act. But the journalists (or whatever we decide to call them) who perform this justified oversight can only do so by exercising clarity in their own right—about their own motives, methods, and intentions. (One of the sad ironies of this latest chapter in the WikiLeaks saga is the revelation that Assange chose to punish *The New York Times* by denying it

direct access to the cables because the paper had earlier published a story examining his management style and the personal controversies surrounding him; presumably Assange would denounce this as censorship if one of his targets were to indulge in such behavior. *The Guardian* ended up sharing its own copies with the *Times*, thus, in effect, leaking the leak.)

What, precisely, are the criteria by which WikiLeaks is deciding to release the cables it opts to publish? How is WikiLeaks selecting the cables it chooses to publish first, and how is it editing them? According to a vetting process described by *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*, Wikileaks has been deleting the names of some of the people mentioned in the cables—but not others. Why, precisely? If their goal is simply “to open up the inner workings of a closed and complex system,” then shouldn’t they be publishing everything? And now we hear that Assange has uploaded a huge file of other confidential documents to various supporters around the world as “insurance,” to be published in the event that hostile governments succeed in silencing him. (He is now in custody in London on charges of rape and faces possible extradition to Sweden for prosecution.) The targets of that megaleak appear to include Bank of America and BP. Will the revelations in these files include commercial data on the firms’ customers? Perhaps their account numbers and credit card information? That might be justified if the aim is to throw light on the workings of these closed systems, but it could also cause enormous harm.

What’s really at stake is whether the technology, with all its intrinsic power and instantaneity, will allow for the introspection necessary for an enterprise like the one that confronts us here. So far, though, I don’t see any convincing answer. And this is a much bigger question than the fate of WikiLeaks or Julian Assange.

—December 15, 2010

1. "WikiLeaks Evolves," www.newyorker.com, December 1, 2010. [↵](#)
2. "Leaked Cables Stir Resentment and Shrugs," *The New York Times* , December 3, 2010. [↵](#)
3. "WikiLeaks: Secrets Shared With Millions Are Not Secret," *The Guardian* , December 1, 2010. [↵](#)

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