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The Whistleblowers

Is WikiLeaks a Blessing or Curse for Democracy?

By *John Goetz and Marcel Rosenbach*

The whistleblowing organization WikiLeaks, which posted the Afghanistan war logs this week, has made publishing government secrets its mission. Many see founder Julian Assange as a hero, but others, including the Pentagon, consider him a threat to national security.

He walks in quickly, a spring in his step. Even before greeting anyone in the room, he searches for a power outlet for his small, black computer.

It's a simple, inexpensive notebook, but the world's intelligence agencies would pay a lot of money for the chance to see what's on it.

The man's name is Julian Assange. He has just come from Stockholm, following a brief stay in Brussels. Before that, he was off the radar for a couple of weeks.

Assange is practically a wanted man these days. It's almost as if he were on the run.

Five agents from the United States Department of Homeland Security tried to pay him a visit two weeks ago, just before he was scheduled to speak at a conference in New York. But their efforts were in vain. Assange decided to stay in England after his attorney had told him that various other US government agencies were also very interested in speaking with him. US Defense Secretary Robert Gates recently characterized Assange and his work as "irresponsible."

A Forum for Anonymous Leaks

Assange is the founder of the Internet platform wikileaks.org. Together with a handful of full-time employees and many volunteers, he has operated the site since 2007. WikiLeaks gathers and publishes material that companies and government agencies have designated as secret. The site acts as a forum for whistleblowers and only publishes original documents -- in other words, no rumors or material written by the WikiLeaks staff.

In the past, WikiLeaks has published e-mails written by former US vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin, exposés about the corrupt activities of former Kenyan leader Daniel Arap Moi and secret documents from the US detention camp at Guantanamo Bay. At that time, the site was mainly visited by insiders, but it gained international attention in April, when Assange invited a group of journalists to the National Press Club in Washington to watch a video.

The film showed the **deadly 2007 attack** by an American Apache helicopter on a group of about a dozen civilians in Baghdad, two of them employees of the Reuters news agency. The voices of the helicopter crew were also audible, their cynical comments only adding to the horror of the images on the video. Since the incident, Reuters had tried in vain to obtain a copy of the video. Assange, however, managed to get one. It was his biggest scoop to date.

A Threat to National Security

For some people, Assange and his collaborators are heroes fighting for total freedom of information and against any form of censorship. But for others they are traitors.

From the standpoint of the American authorities, the Australian is a serious threat to national security

-- something the Pentagon has even put in writing. As early as 2008, the US military classified WikiLeaks as a serious security problem and discussed how best to combat the site. That document was also leaked to Assange -- and then published on wikileaks.org.

Since then, some have voiced concerns about his safety, and even his life. But it isn't quite clear whether the man who is now firing up his computer in London is dangerous or in danger. He is certainly conspicuous: a tall, thin man with snow-white hair and skin that seems unnaturally pale for the summer -- partly because he has spent the last few weeks preparing his next project and hardly ever going outdoors during the day.

In a room on the fifth floor of the building that houses the offices of the *Guardian*, he is giving the British daily newspaper, the *New York Times* and SPIEGEL an early look at a group of **more than 90,000 individual reports** from the war in Afghanistan, most of which are marked "secret."

'Everyday Brutality'

The publication of this archive, **says Assange**, will not only change the way the public sees the war, it will also "change the opinion of people in positions of political and diplomatic influence." According to Assange, the documents "shines light on the everyday brutality and squalor of war" and will "change our perspective on not only the war in Afghanistan, but on all modern wars."

The archive contains intelligence information, assessments and many names, both of military officials and sources. The publication of secret military documentation of a war, which was never intended for the public, raises new questions. Is this journalism, covered by the public's right to information? Is it a legitimate look behind the propaganda machinery of the war? Or is it an act of espionage, and are Assange and his collaborators making themselves guilty of revealing government secrets? And are they ultimately jeopardizing the international troops and the Afghan informants helping them?

A Database on a Flash Drive

WikiLeaks and sites like it have already changed the way governments and corporations handle sensitive information.

There have always been whistleblowers, employees of companies or government agencies who leak confidential information to the press to draw attention to undesirable developments and corruption, or to expose abuses of power. But such an extensive database of war, which fits on a single USB flash drive and can thus be easily published on the Internet, is a new phenomenon.

Is WikiLeaks a new beacon of enlightenment? Or does the website pose a threat to democratic nations, because it allows a former hacker and a few close collaborators to decide which piece of explosive information to unveil next -- without giving the other side a chance to tell its side of the story or take legal steps to stop the leaks? "These people can put out whatever they want and are never held accountable for it," US Defense Secretary Gates said, in response to the publication of the video of the 2007 helicopter incident. Rarely has a member of a US administration seemed so helpless.

The problem starts with the fact that WikiLeaks, to this day, remains more of a brilliant idea than an organization in the conventional sense. It has no headquarters or even a street address, just an anonymous mailbox at the University of Melbourne. So far Assange and a German colleague, who calls himself Daniel Schmitt, are the only two people involved in WikiLeaks to have shown their faces in public. Otherwise, the operation consists of little more than the website itself, a few email addresses and a Twitter account the organizers use for PR purposes. The servers, which are distributed around the world in places with laws that provide extensive protections for informants, are the core of the operation. Donations cover the annual overhead of about €200,000 (\$258,000), and Assange and Schmitt don't even pay themselves salaries.

Highly Intelligent

At the meeting in London, it quickly becomes clear how dependent WikiLeaks is on individual activists -- and, to a large extent, on Assange and his little black laptop. It's also clear that Assange's adversaries have an opponent to be taken seriously in this highly intelligent, self-confident 39-year-old.

Assange is working obsessively on a database with which WikiLeaks intends to make the war in Afghanistan more tangible. He is wearing an odd combination of a wrinkled jacket, a T-shirt, cargo pants and worn-out tennis shoes. He is unshaven and looks as if he hasn't slept for two nights. Well-meaning people close to him say that he urgently needs a couple of weeks of vacation.

Assange disagrees. His fingers fly across the keyboard, and he occasionally pauses to say something. "We need a function that arranges the incidents by their relative importance," he says in his deep, sonorous voice. Before long, he has installed a filter that allows the site's users to search through the thousands of individual incidents according to their "significance." Assange has chosen the number of civilian casualties as one of the primary criteria. The database can also be searched by date and region, and each individual incident is linked to a map view showing exactly where in Afghanistan it occurred. It's war as a multimedia presentation.

"Ha," he says suddenly. "Unbelievable." He has discovered yet another grotesque example of the jargon the military uses to describe reality on the battlefield. The term is: "Vital Signs Absent" -- in other words, dead. The language of war fascinates him, which explains why WikiLeaks titled the Baghdad video "Collateral Murder." His purpose in choosing the title, says Assange, was to expose the cynical term "collateral damage" and make it impossible to use.

'Our Criteria Are Crystal-Clear'

When Assange talks about this project -- over dinner, for example, during which the Australian orders nothing but two scoops of cardamom ice cream -- he is intent on sending the message that WikiLeaks is a radical, carefully conceived project. Assange takes a long time to reflect before answering questions, and he insists on delivering his full response. He doesn't like to be interrupted.

Assange says that he came up with the basic idea in the 1990s, and in 1999 he reserved the domain name leaks.org. For Assange, the fundamental rule in open societies must be that everyone should be able to communicate freely about everything. Experience, he says, shows that wherever there are secrets there is often wrongdoing, because people in positions of power tend to use secrets to their advantage.

If his view is correct, there are probably quite a few powerful people in the world who should be very concerned, because WikiLeaks supposedly has a wealth of still-unpublished material. Who decides what is published, and when?

The source, says Assange. Whenever it receives an anonymous submission, WikiLeaks asks the informant why he or she believes that the material is of political or moral relevance. "Our criteria are crystal clear, and if they are met, we publish," says Assange.

Who is "we?" "In the end, someone has to be in charge, and that's me," says Assange. "And when in doubt, I'll always publish."

Living a Nomad's Life

It's a remarkable position for an organization that doesn't even publish the names of the five paid staff it allegedly employs -- and for a man who tries to dodge questions about his own life. A few basic facts, at any rate, seem clear.

Assange was born in 1971 to a family of artists in Queensland, Australia. His parents eventually separated, but when his mother remarried, the relationship also failed. It was so disastrous, in fact, that his mother took Julian and fled from her second husband, even living under a false name for a while.

Even then, he was living a nomad's life, and he reportedly attended almost 40 different schools.

As long ago as the 1980s, the Stone Age of the Internet, when a personal computer was a Commodore 64 and modems were referred to as "acoustic couplers," Assange developed a passion for computers and networks. He later made a name for himself in the Melbourne hacker community, after successfully hacking into corporate and government networks, including American military computers.

"It was God Almighty walking around doing what you like," a prosecuting attorney said a few years later. The group of hackers to which Assange belonged even monitored the Australian federal police investigation of them online. Assange was eventually fined and sentenced to a form of probation. A television report on the case shows Assange in a trenchcoat and sunglasses, his long, brown hair tied into a ponytail. The group of hackers called itself the "International Subversives."

Assange already had a young son when he was sentenced. He was young himself when he became a father, but he soon became embroiled in a bitter custody battle with the child's mother that lasted for several years -- and led to renewed run-ins with government agencies.

An Attempt to Get Revenge?

Is WikiLeaks merely a way for a hurt hacker and unrecognized computer genius to get revenge? Because of his personal history, is Assange really talking about the government when he talks about the "enemy?"

These are the kinds of questions that journalists typically ask Assange. He hates them with the same passion with which he despises the "secret" stamp on official documents. For him, WikiLeaks is also a project that is about transforming traditional media. He wants users to form their own opinions on the basis of original documents, without any journalistic spin. But with the "Collateral Murder" video, WikiLeaks violated its own principles by adding an editorialized title, for which Assange came in for some criticism.

The problem, says the Australian, arises in the head of the reporter. He prefers scientific journals, with their footnotes and lists of references. Although he describes himself as an investigative journalist, his work is in fact more like that of an archivist and librarian. It isn't an accident that he has registered WikiLeaks as a library in Australia.

Assange and his colleagues can be very pleased with the development of WikiLeaks at the moment. A few days ago, the Australian gave a talk to investigative journalists in London, while his German collaborator Daniel Schmitt spoke in Hamburg -- both to enthusiastic applause. They were awarded Amnesty International's media prize last year.

Under a Shadow

But the project has been under a shadow since May 29. On that day, Bradley Manning, a 22-year-old US soldier, was arrested at the Forward Operating Base Hammer in Iraq and taken to a military prison at Camp Arifjan in Kuwait.

The US military has since made public its charges against Manning, a former military analyst. It claims that between Nov. 19, 2009 and the spring of this year, he downloaded the Baghdad video published by WikiLeaks, as well as 150,000 secret diplomatic cables by the US State Department and a secret PowerPoint presentation.

The US military accuses Manning of having passed on the video and 50 of the wire reports to a "person not entitled to receive them." According to a US Army spokesman, Manning could face up to 52 years in prison if convicted.

It appears that Manning blew his own cover. On May 21, he apparently began a series of Internet chats with an American hacker named Adrian Lamo. The US magazine *Wired* has published excerpts

of the chats.

Lip-Syncing to Lady Gaga

One of the parties to the correspondence, who US authorities believe is Manning, poured his heart out to Lamo, a complete stranger to him until then. He described how he was able to access the SIPRNET and JWICS secret networks through two work computers, and that he also found unprotected material on a US Central Command (CENTCOM) computer. "I can't believe what I'm confessing to you," he added.

In the chats, he even revealed how he supposedly smuggled the material out of his workplace. He said that he inserted blank CDs into his work computers in Iraq, which he had previously labeled "Lady Gaga," so as to create the impression that he was taking home music CDs. According to the chat logs, Manning said that he "listened and lip-synced to Lady Gaga's 'Telephone' while exfiltrating possibly the largest data spillage in American history."

The chatter made several references to WikiLeaks and Assange, with whom he claimed he was in contact. He also suggested that he was motivated by a deep dissatisfaction with the local situation and the US military.

Lamo informed the FBI and turned over his chat logs. In interviews with the US media, he sought to justify his actions by saying he was concerned that national security was at threat. Manning was arrested a short time later.

Outing the Whistleblowers

The Manning case turned into delicate situation for WikiLeaks and Assange. It bears an uncanny resemblance to a scenario aimed at harming WikiLeaks that the US military concocted in a secret document in 2008. According to the scenario, successful identification, prosecution and outing of individuals who pass on information to WikiLeaks would damage and possibly even destroy the site, and deter others from taking similar steps.

How does the WikiLeaks founder feel about the US soldier's supposed self-incrimination?

"If we are to believe the allegation, Manning was betrayed by a US journalist-computer hacker who had nothing to do with WikiLeaks," Assange says. "We can't save people from themselves, unfortunately."

'We Have No Idea if Manning Was Our Source'

Could Manning also have been the source of the Afghanistan material, as some observers are now speculating? "We have no idea if he was our source," Assange claims. "We structure our system so that we do not know the identity of our sources."

And why does WikiLeaks want to provide Manning with legal assistance, if WikiLeaks has indeed installed technical safeguards to make it impossible for it to know who submitted the material?

"We have to assist all our alleged sources," says Assange. "We should remember that regardless of whether Mr. Manning was the source for the 'Collateral Murder' video or whether he was directly or incidentally involved in any of the materials we have published, he is a young man who is detained in Kuwait as a result of an allegation that he is our source."

Staying with Supporters Around the World

After Manning's arrest, Assange also disappeared for a few weeks, and his attorneys advised him to avoid traveling to the United States. "One of our contacts informed me that there was consideration being given as to whether I could be charged as a co-conspirator to commit espionage," he says.

That's the reason he checked into a London hotel under a false name and then made a quick

disappearance to stay with one of his supporters, as has so often been the case in the past few years. He has stayed in places all around the world, from Kenya to Iceland, where he and a team of volunteers prepared to publish the Baghdad video.

The precautions apply to everyone in his group. When Jacob Appelbaum, a well-known programmer in the Internet community, stood in for Assange at a hackers' convention in New York two weekends ago, he even hired a double to pose as him after he had given his talk. Appelbaum himself went directly to the airport, carrying only his passport, some cash and a copy of the US Bill of Rights, and took a flight overseas.

Increasingly Cautious

Daniel Schmitt, the German representative of WikiLeaks who is, next to Assange, the second most important voice of WikiLeaks, has also become more cautious.

During a meeting with SPIEGEL in a Berlin café, Schmitt looks around to see if anyone is listening to the conversation. He also says that he doesn't want photographs taken in his presence.

Germany is one of the most important sites for WikiLeaks, acting as one of the pillars of the relatively loose-knit organization. WikiLeaks receives many submissions in German, it gets technical assistance from people associated with the Chaos Computer Club, an influential German hacker organization, and German supporters are responsible for a large share of its donations.

Schmitt, a slim, bearded 32-year-old with horn-rimmed glasses, studied computer science and worked in IT security before devoting himself completely to WikiLeaks. He looks almost pedestrian next to the somewhat eccentric Assange, who has been known to walk around in London in his socks and suddenly do a cartwheel.

Just the Beginning

A foundation called "Friends of WikiLeaks" is expected to be launched in Germany this year. Schmitt is working on a brochure designed to encourage people to leak information, which he wants volunteers to hand out in front of the Reichstag, the seat of the German parliament, and the Defense Ministry. He has also considered placing ads in the subway.

The two men, Assange and Schmitt, say that WikiLeaks has a mountain of unpublished documents at its disposal -- and that this is just the beginning.

"If we want to use a mountain-climbing metaphor, we're only at the base camp," says Assange.

Then he snaps his little black laptop shut, packs it into his charcoal-gray nylon backpack, and walks out of the room.

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

URL:

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,708632,00.html>

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