



WIKILEAKS: SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER?

Events: WikiLeaks was launched in 2006 as a project of the Sunshine Press. Since January 2007, its key spokesperson has been Julian Assange, an Australian internet activist, often described as the 'founder of WikiLeaks'. The main purpose of Wikileaks is to publish and comment on leaked documents alleging government and corporate misconduct, with documents and other materials being submitted anonymously through an electronic 'drop box'. Either directly, or through collaboration with other media (including, at times, The Guardian, the New York Times and Der Spiegel), WikiLeaks has published a massive quantity of documents on issues ranging from war, killing, torture and detention to the suppression of free speech and free press, and ecology and climate change. Many of the most high profile leaks have shed light on US military, security and intelligence activities. These have included almost 400,000 previously secret US military field reports about the Iraq War; secret US files on the war in Afghanistan which reveal civilian killings, 'friendly fire' deaths and the activities of special forces; more than 250,000 US state department cables, sent from, or to, US embassies around the world (so-called 'CableGate'); and US military files containing secret assessments of the 779 detainees held at the Guantánamo Bay detention centre. In 2016, figures connected with the Russian government allegedly hacked the emails of Hillary Clinton, the Democratic Party's nominee in the US presidential election. The emails subsequently found their way onto WikiLeaks, damaging Clinton and possibly affecting the outcome of the election.

Significance: Making use of the new internet culture and modern technology, WikiLeaks has been responsible for the biggest leak of secret information in history. However, assessments of the implications and value of its work have varied starkly. Supporters have used two key arguments to uphold media freedom. The first is that transparency is the only effective means of preventing, or at least reducing, conspiracy, corruption, exploitation and oppression. Quite simply, those in power, whether in government, the military, the security forces or in the world of business and finance, will be less likely to abuse their positions and engage in unethical activities if they know that their actions may be publicly exposed. Open



governance thus promotes good governance. Second, media freedom underpins democracy, in that it allows citizens to make up their own minds, having access to information from all sources and not merely 'official' sources. There is therefore a clear public interest defence for 'whistleblowing', or 'principled leaking'. This was accepted by the 1971 'Pentagon Papers' case, in which the US Supreme Court upheld the right of the New York Times to publish classified documents about the conduct of the Vietnam War, leaked by Daniel Ellsberg, on the grounds that 'only a free and unconstrained press can effectively expose deception in government'.

WikiLeak's activities have also attracted criticism, however. These have included that WikiLeaks has been over-concerned with generating publicity for itself and with promoting funding (especially in the light of restrictions imposed by the financial industry on online payments to WikiLeaks). However, the most serious criticisms have alleged that WikiLeaks has allowed information to get into the public domain that could both threaten national security and leave intelligence operatives working in foreign countries, together with those who assist them, vulnerable to identification and reprisals. This has been claimed, in particular, in relation to CableGate, where the alleged source of the leaked embassy cables, Private Chelsea Manning (previously known as Bradley Manning), a US army intelligence analyst, was accused in a pre-trial military court hearing in December 2011 of 'aiding the enemy'. The release of the CableGate documents stimulated a wave of criticism not only from governments around the world, but also from human rights groups and former sympathizers and

partners, including *The Guardian*. Some have accused Wikileaks of going beyond a traditional liberal defence of openness and transparent government in supporting 'free information fundamentalism', a stance that has deeply libertarian, if not anarchist, implications. For example, the private rituals of the Masons, Mormons and other groups were published even though this did not serve a clear political purpose.

Finally, WikiLeaks has been accused of subverting democracy by putting information in the public domain and possibly influencing political outcomes without having to respect any requirement to present a balanced picture. Thus, in helping to publicize Hillary Clinton's hacked emails in 2016, WikiLeaks may have tipped the political balance in favour of her Republican opponent, Donald Trump.