

**CASE 6-D****WIKILEAKS**

LEE WILKINS

*Wayne State University  
University of Missouri*

In her book about secrets, ethicist Sissela Bok maintains that there are only two professions that regard keeping secrets as morally questionable at the outset: psychiatrists and journalists. Had she written the book about three decades later, Bok would at least have had to consider one additional, if non-traditional profession: computer hackers.

Australian-native Julian Assange, who describes his profession as hacker, has made the assertion multiple times that secret keeping, when done by nation states, is bad. Assange means this characterization in a moral/ethical sense. Thus, in 2005 and 2006, he created an organization—his title there was CEO and editor—that had the goal of releasing state secrets that were leaked to the nonprofit group.

While Assange was interested in all secrets, he was particularly interested in those kept by the most powerful nation on earth and its allies: the United States. In those early years, Assange began emailing the British publication the *Guardian* with unsolicited tips that led the *Guardian* to some remarkable stories, among them the Kroll report, which detailed how former Kenyan President Danile Arap Moi had stashed hundreds of thousands of pounds in foreign bank accounts—a story of political corruption most news organizations would have been proud to publish.

Assange first came to media attention in the United States in 2010 when Wikileaks published the video footage of Iranian civilians, including journalists working for Reuters, being gunned down by a US Apache helicopter. The US military had denied this version of events, and continued to do so until the video emerged. The resulting news coverage, coming as it did when the United States was bogged down in what became a decade-long conflict, catapulted Assange to international media attention.

But Assange had a great deal more information to offer. In 2010, Wikileaks published more than 400,000 documents—everything from raw reports of foreign service officers to military accounts of specific incidents—about the US prosecution of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Collectively called the “war logs,” these documents and their release raised central ethical questions for news organizations.

Those questions began with how individual news organizations cooperated with Assange in the release and verification of the documents. In addition to the *Guardian*, the *New York Times* and the German publication *Der Spiegel* entered into collaborative arrangements with Assange that allowed the individual news organizations to verify the facts in the documents and, when necessary—for example, when life might be at stake—to redact elements of the documents (most often names and locations) in news accounts.

These collaborative arrangements were unprecedented, in part because they involved multiple news organizations and were international in scope, and, in part because these documents—unlike the Pentagon Papers, which had set the standard for leaks that questioned the US government's international political policies—were about events that were ongoing and had the potential to upset or even end decades of diplomatic efforts. In addition, Assange himself proved exceptionally difficult to work with (Leigh and Harding 2011). He was often impossible to contact, unreliable in terms of keeping agreements, and, by 2011, embroiled in a criminal sex scandal in Sweden.

The various collaborative arrangements Assange developed with news organizations, particularly the *New York Times*, fell apart in the months after the publication of the war logs. Ultimately, Assange placed the documents—unredacted and unverified—on the web. In April 2011, Wikileaks began publishing secret files about the prisoners in the notorious Guantanamo Bay prison camp. How journalists treated all these files became the focus of one element of the ethical debate surrounding this complicated series of events.

A second focus of ethical debate was how Wikileaks obtained its information. Wikileaks did no independent reporting. Instead, it relied on others to provide “leaked” information. In the case of the war logs, that source was 23-year-old Bradley Manning, an army private, who was court-martialed for violating the Espionage Act, later pardoned by President Barack Obama, and now lives as a woman calling herself Chelsea Manning.

After Manning's arrest, it was widely reported that the private had an access to classified information in his role as a communication specialist, that he was bright, interested in technology and computers from an early age, and gay at a time when the US military still operated under the policy of “don't ask, don't tell.” Servicemen and women who “came out” were dishonorably discharged. As more details about Manning emerged, Wikileaks critics questioned whether Assange had taken advantage of a vulnerable young man who did not understand the

magnitude of the charges that could be leveled against him and would lack the personal resources to mount a vigorous defense if his role in the war logs were discovered.

Finally, there was Assange himself, a complex, mercurial figure even before the war logs were released. Assange was concerned about whether powerful governments—particularly the United States—would extradite him to the United States to face a multiplicity of charges emerging from his role in the release of classified documents.

### Micro Issues

1. Is Assange a journalist? A hacker? An information middleman? A whistleblower? In an ethical sense, does his occupation matter?
2. Sophisticated news organizations entered into agreements with Assange before they published documents. Based on an ethical analysis, what should those agreements have focused on? Why?
3. When presented with documents such as those in the war logs, what specific steps should news organizations take to confirm them? Does this include asking government officials to verify or explain the contents?
4. How should news organizations treat both Wikileaks and Manning? After you have reviewed coverage, how would you evaluate the journalists' relationship with these two sources?

### Midrange Issues

1. At one point, Assange hid in *Guardian* reporter David Leigh's house. Is this an appropriate thing for a journalist deeply involved in the story to do for a source? Does your answer change if Leigh were a documentary filmmaker?
2. How would you respond to the previous questions if the leaked documents came not from government but from a private for-profit organization such as a chemical or pharmaceutical firm?
3. In an ethical sense, contrast the process of "going under cover" from publishing leaks.
4. Strategic communication professionals often have access to corporate strategy documents and similar sorts of information? Evaluate whether strategic communication professionals have the same sort of whistleblower responsibility as those who uncover government wrongdoing.

5. Does Assange's personal character matter in how a journalist or new organization should evaluate his actions?

## Macro Issues

1. What role do organizations such as Wikileaks fulfill in democratic societies? How is that role like and unlike that of news organizations?
2. Governments frequently claim that some of what they do needs to remain secret to be effective. Evaluate this claim from the perspective of a citizen, a journalist, and a diplomat.

## CASE 6-E

### CONTROL ROOM: DO CULTURE AND HISTORY MATTER IN REPORTING THE NEWS?

LEE WILKINS

*Wayne State University  
University of Missouri*

Almost a decade before the 2011 Arab Spring, there was Al-Jazeera, a fledgling Middle Eastern television network with 40 million viewers predominantly in that region. (Currently, Al-Jazeera includes a staff in Washington, DC, and the network itself is available worldwide including a strong cable and internet presence.)

Journalists routinely cite the expression that “truth is the first casualty of war,” but those in charge of Al-Jazeera also know that modern war cannot be waged without an intense propaganda effort on all sides of the conflict. Thus, when the United States was getting ready to invade Baghdad, director Jehane Noujaim requested and received permission to film the work of Al-Jazeera journalists as they covered the conflict. The 86-minute film, *Control Room*, won numerous awards.

Noujaim said that his goal was to produce a documentary about how truth is gathered, delivered, and ultimately created by those who deliver it. By telling the story of the coverage of the Iraqi invasion through the eyes of Arab journalists—many of whom had worked for news organizations such as the BBC before they worked for Al-Jazeera—the documentary provides an insider's view of how journalists report a