

a crucible of my words*A journalist's writing pad*

Repairing the leak that changed the worldPosted on [February 7, 2011](#) by [admin](#)***By Karuna Kumar***

Some people call him an anti-American terrorist. Some call him a maniac and some call him a sire of the Internet age. He is the man on the run with the biggest leak in history. Julian Assange, the name polarizes people. Between the portrait of a messiah and the face of a manipulative hacker, his image hangs precariously somewhere in the middle.

The Leak

Assange, the mind behind the extraordinary leak of half a million classified US State department cables that were revealed in November 2010 has been a historian's dream but a diplomat's nightmare.

From reports of worldwide significance like the dangers of Pakistan's developing nuclear weapons to diplomatic title tattle, the cables have revealed information that is highly sensitive in nature inviting a furore of questions about the right and wrong; the ethical and unethical, the perils of digitization and the role of new media in society.

Investigations into the issue have revealed that these cables were among the huge electronic archives that the US state government had put under a system program called SIPDIS. It stands for Secret Internet Protocol Router Distribution Network and the purpose of it is to make it easier to share information among US government agencies.

Further research into the source of these leaks uncovers the name Bradley Manning, a former soldier who has been allegedly charged with leaking confidential information and is currently awaiting a court-martial.

Understanding different perspectives

Through various events, a cloud of perspectives and opinions have enveloped this issue. Fingers are being raised at the authenticity of the leaks, the possibility of the leak being above the law, the intentions of Assange being anti-American and the credibility of Assange himself.

On one hand, the current defeat of the Whistleblower Protection Enhancement Act in the US is a reflection of the extent to which the leaks of government documents have affected lawmakers and on another, the release of his book, *WIKILEAKS – Inside Julian Assange’s War on Secrecy*, in collaboration with the Guardian, has sparked off a movement among citizens and journalists alike who have embraced the role of activists of freedom of speech, independence of the press and the public interest.

“I think that there are two issues: the state department cables and WikiLeaks. One is embarrassing and of political significance, the other is a process with an intrepid story and interesting personalities,” says Dr Dannie Jost, Resident Philosopher at the World Trade Institute while speaking at an event recently held in London organised by the [London Communications and Engagement Group](#) on the issue [“WikiLeaks – Does it Matter?”](#)

An anti-American agenda?



Revered Columnist of the Washington Post and Senior Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, Michael Gerson expresses his firm rejection of the idea that information should always be free. In his column titled ‘WikiLeaks gives dangerous ammunition to a tyrant’, he says, “Secrecy is often the precondition for political opposition in an oppressive society and secrecy can also be a necessary protection for honesty. The quality of disclosures in the confessional would be diminished if confessions were posted on YouTube.”

Holding the same school of thought, Mark Fitzpatrick, Director, Non-Proliferation and Disarmament

Programme, International Institute for Strategic Studies and former US deputy Assistant Secretary of State remarks, "Assange's intentions were purely guided by antipathy for America. How can we trust the intentions of a man who has risen from being a hacker? This is purely hacker anarchism and is an Anti-American agenda."

Contradicting this, a senior journalist from the BBC who did not want to be named, responds, "I don't know much about Assange's motives. Putting the world to rights and exposing wrong-doing appear to be high on his agenda. I think it would be too simplistic to just try to brand him as being anti-American. In fact, I would like to question as to what is happening to the American serviceman who is the source of much or most of the controversial material. The conditions under which he is being held amount to a gross breach of his human rights and he should be rapidly brought before a court or released."

Role of media

The question then arises whether the media is fuelling an antipathy for Americans or is it actually acting as a conduit of truth revealing what should be in public interest? "The role of media will never change. Just by its definition media mediates, carries information and enables interaction. I think that it is our view of the media that is evolving. Media is powerful stuff and all politicians know this. However, we also have to recognise that media is a business, a necessity and an evil at times," Jost points out.

The senior journalist from the BBC remarks, "I don't think it has changed the role of the media. It is mainly the sheer size of the material and the channel through which it was released which makes it different."

In response to whether the media should have helped in the release of these documents, he adds, "Once the documents or the information came into the hands of WikiLeaks, publication was in my view the only possible course especially for material which threw light on serious breaches of human rights and responsibility for loss of life."

To this one can add that in this given age and time, where news and information has taken the shape of a global commodity, do we need to reconfigure the meaning of public interest? What may be of interest to one may bring much trouble and humiliation to another.

A sustainable model?



On another note, given that Visa and Mastercard withdrew their support of WikiLeaks through tremendous pressure from the US government, for how long can this model of media, acting as an international activist, sustain itself?

“Any actions taken by credit card companies against Wikileaks on political rather than credit worthiness grounds must be labeled abhorrent. But this area does point to the Achilles heel of a very small and inexperienced organisation when taking on the powerful armoury of states and big business”, explains the senior journalist from the BBC.

“I find the process, the narrative, and the discourse fascinating, necessary and inevitable. The media landscape is evolving, technology is pulling it by the ears, and we are watching the show. Humans (society) want to know and as long as we want to know, the media will adapt to fulfill our information demands,” says Jost.

Bringing another perspective to fore, Matt O’Neill, Managing Director of [ModComms Limited](#), a specialist communications agency says, “Let’s be clear about something. WikiLeaks in itself didn’t draw much attention at all. It was a concerted and co-ordinated mainstream media effort that did. *Der Spiegel*, *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *El Pais* and *The New York Times* were the ones that really shone the spotlight when releasing selected diplomatic cables. As much as the Internet glitterati would love to believe WikiLeaks and its ilk represent a new power, I believe they are currently deluded. It still takes a mainstream media narrative to bring issues to the attention of the wider public.”

In the tug of war between independence of the press, freedom of speech and the other stakeholders who have titled this issue as immoral and unworthy, it is difficult to judge whose win this is in the end. “The guy with the big gun will win in the end! They say that the pen is mightier than the sword, but they said nothing about guns. All kidding aside, I think that authentic words are not to be underestimated. Reality and future are first a Gestalt made of words,” Jost remarked.

Challenge for the internal communicator

Referring to the communications industry in particular, O’Neill says, “Internal Communicators and HR

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professionals may find in the future that part of their job description includes developing 'insider threat' programmes as highlighted by the Obama White House recently. This could include designing activities aimed at highlighting employee propensity to leak sensitive information. That to me, seems a practical implication for in-house practitioners of the near and mid-term future."

This event has lead to many implications and is a wake-up call for politicians and companies to recognize the arrival of new media, technology, digitization and the perils that come with it. What effect this eventually would have and what fate awaits WikiLeaks is an answer we all eagerly await. However the gamut of issues it has raised concerning the media, the citizens and the state cannot be overlooked.

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