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*Trepidation:
Why do we struggle to defend WikiLeaks
and its problematic founder?*

by Scott Eldridge II

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*Why do we struggle to defend WikiLeaks
and its problematic founder?*

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Abstract

On the surface, much of WikiLeaks' approach and mission seem agreeable with concepts of information freedom: Advocating government transparency, holding power to account, espousing idealistic concepts of democracy, and of access to information and its role in societies. On the surface, these seem to be good things. And still, media and journalism more broadly have not quite figured out how to come to terms with WikiLeaks and its sometimes enigmatic, sometimes divisive, and sometimes problematic founder Julian Assange. This paper will explore some of the challenges that WikiLeaks and Assange have confronted, and still confront, in gaining consistent support.

WikiLeaks has posed obvious challenges, particularly to governments who hoped to keep their secrets to themselves, and several banks, private corporations and institutions that would rather their dealings go unpublished. Dealing with WikiLeaks, however, presents its own set of challenges, and many of these are tied to the way WikiLeaks the entity, and Julian Assange as its founder have been made nearly synonymous. The two are, of course, rather interwoven. Both the technological and the philosophical enterprise of WikiLeaks trace back to Assange's early years as a computer hacker in Australia. Over time, the marriage of his computer savvy, with a philosophy of transparency and openness with a seemingly libertarian vein to it, developed into WikiLeaks, and carries into the mission it espouses and expresses:

The broader principles on which our work is based are the defence of freedom of speech and media publishing, the improvement of our common historical record and the support of the rights of all people to create new history. (WikiLeaks.org/about)

This ideology allows, or once allowed, WikiLeaks to work as a technologically guarded conduit of information. While gaffes exposing un-redacted versions of the U.S. State Department cables, and a block on donations by Visa and Mastercard, have harmed its abilities to operate, the infrastructure created by Assange still forms an exemplar for transparency and potential whistleblowing in a digital era. Under this model, the otherwise secret Iraq and Afghanistan War Logs, the U.S. State Department cables, and other troves of data from banks, corporations, and religious groups, have been made public. Under this design, WikiLeaks has been a much-discussed phenomenon, and inspired similar models that would publish data, with documents in full, and journalists alone or in collaboration

can visit the site and research, investigate and write news stories about the data. With WikiLeaks, the coordinated publishing with *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* and *Der Spiegel* (and later *Le Monde* and *El País*) formalised these roles, but the premise underlying WikiLeaks carried forward:

[T]o bring important news and information to the public. We provide an innovative, secure and anonymous way for sources to leak information to our journalists. (WikiLeaks.org/about)

But on the way, something went wrong. Something separate from the exposure of un-redacted cables that has been blamed variously on Assange, former WikiLeaks associate Daniel Domscheit-Berg, *The Guardian* investigations editor David Leigh, *The Guardian* more broadly, or unknown hackers, crackers, or insiders. Which side of these arguments you land on depends strongly on how you choose to look at WikiLeaks, and whether your reference point is aimed at Julian Assange, founder and provocateur of WikiLeaks' particular brand of transparency, or at WikiLeaks' role in some of the biggest news stories of 2010 and 2011. These differences can be rather stark, but too often the differences are subsumed into one problematic case.

If we had a way of labelling WikiLeaks as something 'journalistic' the organisation and the founder might be dealt with separately, but news media do not seem ready to sign off on this assertion, and it is problematic for many reasons beyond categorisation. One is the academic approach and theoretical explorations of Assange's and WikiLeaks' roles that revolve around particular definitions and theories. In purely practical terms, there are greater legal implications dependent on whether WikiLeaks and Assange are defined as journalistic. These further muddy the picture, and seem to make the separate inseparable.

Assange, for his part, seems keen to tweak and prod the press around every turn, which has not made him many friends within

journalism lining up to defend him when things turn problematic. He does have his advocates within the journalism profession: John Pilger is often rallying to his cause, Glenn Greenwald has written and appeared in support of WikiLeaks and Assange, and the freelance journalist Vaughan Smith has housed Assange while his extradition hearings have played out. However, against these examples of personal support, and while journalistic outlets tend not to attack WikiLeaks as such, they have been less overt in support of Assange, and are at least perceived as less supportive.

What lies behind that seemingly obvious case for support in WikiLeaks the entity is a tangled mess of personality clashes, and burnt bridges. In some cases the persona – Assange – has been particularly pointed in his critiques of coverage of him, and of the journalists who have written about him. They emerge out of a post-WikiLeaks discourse that revolves around the persona of Assange, and the potential he might face charges in Sweden for sexual offences. Critiques and invectives often point towards *The Guardian's* Nick Davies and David Leigh, or the *New York Times's* Ravi Somaiya and John Burns, who have reported on Assange. These judgments come through veiled and less-veiled critiques on WikiLeaks Twitter account, as well as emanating from an array of sites devoted to WikiLeaks and its cause. It goes beyond Tweets and blog posts, though, as Assange has filed dozens of complaints alleging libel to the UK's Press Complaints Commission (PCC) related to coverage of his being wanted for questioning in Sweden on allegations of sexual offences.

Whether this coverage is appreciated, it seems deserved. Assange, for his part, has not been subtle or hidden from view. From his role in bringing about the leaks of previously secret military and diplomatic cables, to being held for questioning on sex charges, to his show on *Russia Today*, Assange has not stepped off the public stage in any way. In between coordinating leaks, and defending against Sweden's efforts to extradite him, he found time to record his voice for

a cameo on *The Simpsons*, has appeared at public protests for Occupy London, and remains otherwise present globally, often appearing at forums via Skype from his house arrest in the UK. There has been a musical written and staged, book upon book drafted and published – Assange's own unauthorised autobiography among them, complete with its own mini-saga. In many ways, since the publication of the War Logs and the cables, the persona of Assange has overtaken the message and mission of the organisation he founded. Case in point: In research towards a much larger analysis of coverage of WikiLeaks, several stories make mention of his shock of white hair as potentially trend setting.

None of this, as it were, relates to WikiLeaks, only to its founder. None of this relates to whether or not Assange was complicit or engaged in obtaining secret U.S. documents, which would form the core of any charges of espionage under U.S. laws. But WikiLeaks and Assange seem to have become one, and supporters of WikiLeaks see Assange's being held and potential extradition, as an attack on WikiLeaks, and the allegations of sexual offences as a conspiracy with the U.S. The whole thing has been quite muddled, and this makes it terribly difficult to locate the value of the entity when it is no longer separate from the persona. As Greenwald writes: "Who wants to be seen advocating for an unhygienic, abusive egomaniac."

In an October 2010 article in *The Nation*, Peter Ludlow also writes about this as a culture clash, where the staid press and the traditional government dynamics try to make sense of the rise of WikiLeaks, anonymous, and 'hactivist' cultures:

"What the discussion has revealed, however, is that the media and government agencies believe there is a single protagonist to be concerned with – something of a James Bond villain, if you will – when in fact the protagonist is something altogether different: an informal network of revolutionary individuals bound by a shared ethic and culture."

And so, the separation of Assange and WikiLeaks has been conflated into one entity, and often dealt as such.

Can this go forward?

What might help both Assange, and the legacy of WikiLeaks as an ardent exercise of freedom of expression, freedom of information, and transparency, would be to separate the two. If moving the ways the man is approached further from the way the mission is addressed, WikiLeaks could become bigger than the persona of Assange. It is, in simple terms, a call for both détente and nuance, but it seems it will forever be more complicated than that. WikiLeaks is very much born out of the persona of Assange, and Assange as a persona is very much born out of WikiLeaks.

And maybe that's where the problem lies. Tough to defend cases have often been praised by free expression advocates as worthy of support, while the more problematic personas around them are kept at arms length. Assange seems to fill that role for detractors: tough to defend, but not going away. On top of that, with his upending of the traditional approaches to investigating news, matched with his sometimes acerbic, sometimes ingratiating, personality, arms length is not even always the case.

But, without that odd pairing, there would be no WikiLeaks to speak of. As one journalist interviewed about his work with the WikiLeaks troves said, it takes that particular brand of personality to drive such an endeavour. In other words: without the divisive figure of Assange, there would not be a WikiLeaks, there would not be this recent burst of journalism developed around tranches of secret data and there would not be this discussion of transparency and digital whistleblowing and future opportunities for journalism.

WikiLeaks deserves a bit of a more nuanced analysis before it is dismissed or embraced, and it is certainly made more complicated with each step of the saga. But its value does

not rise or fall with Assange. For advocates and supporters of freedom of media, speech, and expression, it would be well worth separating the two.

If that can be done.

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