

Propaganda and the Ethics of WikiLeaks

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Abstract

Much concern has been expressed about the political power wielded by WikiLeaks, an organization devoted to challenging established power by providing a safe, anonymous conduit for whistleblowers. Some view this organization as treasonous, or in violation of laws prohibiting espionage, and have called for the assassination of its founder, Julian Assange. This paper sketches some of the different ethical parameters and nodal points involved in the WikiLeaks phenomenon: the anonymous leakers, the WikiLeaks organization, the mass media outlets favoured by WikiLeaks, the general public, and possible political and legal responses to the leakages. The issue connects with some familiar ethical questions: the newspaper publisher's treatment of leaks from anonymous sources, the ethics of (non-anonymous) whistle-blowing, the ethics of violating secrecy, and the ethics of propaganda use.

I review Margaret Somerville's arguments leading to her conclusion that WikiLeaks are on the whole a bad thing. I argue, making use of historical examples, that she doesn't take sufficiently into account the potential for good from WikiLeaks, particularly in the light of an increasingly propagandized society where truth is obscured by muzzling government or corporate officials, discouraging investigative reporting, and making use of sophisticated public relations techniques to condition the public mind. I conclude that WikiLeaks could well be a good thing, but the potential could be undermined by irresponsible behaviour by the operators. Its effectiveness could also be undermined by pseudo-leakages or other ways of discrediting the personnel and operations of WikiLeaks.

Introduction: the ethical parameters

Much has been written recently about the ethics of *WikiLeaks*¹, the mechanism devised by Julian Assange and others whereby those with access to secret government or corporate documents (legitimately or through hacking), are provided with the means for exposing them anonymously on the internet. Whereas whistleblowers in the past might have contemplated exposing government or corporate wrongdoing, their own careers usually suffered, sometimes terminating abruptly. With anonymity, this strong deterrent to whistle blowing is removed. The benefits from enabling timely exposure of official deceptions can be enormous, such as avoidance of a costly and ill-fated war. Daniel Ellsberg, who leaked official documents that contradicted the optimistic claims from US military leaders about progress in the Vietnam War, wishes he had done so earlier to greater effect. Not surprisingly, he has expressed support for the WikiLeaks exposures alleged to have been provided by Private Bradley Manning².

Proper assessment of the ethics of WikiLeaks requires us to move beyond a single perspective looking only at the positive effects. What is the possible harm from *WikiLeaks*? What other ethical parameters come into play besides calculation of probable outcomes in each individual case? A wide array of ethical concerns arises from the fact that different elements connect the initiating leaker to the general public. When Daniel Ellsberg went to *The New York Times* and other media with his Pentagon Papers he was an identifiable source.

By contrast, selected media to which Assange's organisation passed on voluminous secret communications, were not in direct contact with the leaker. This makes it difficult or impossible for the publisher to suggest to readers possible motivations for the leak, which in turn could have bearing on the truth or proper interpretation of the leaked matter. A favourable assessment of WikiLeaks' ethics supposes the leaker to be sincerely motivated by the public interest, exposing some vital deceptions perpetrated on an unsuspecting public. But other motivations are possible: retaliation by disaffected workers, enhancement of career prospects by ensuring the demise of a superior, political or financial opportunism, or perhaps just sheer mischief.

Other ethical considerations abound. Secrecy can often be justified on the grounds that without assurance of confidentiality, full and frank discussion of sensitive matters would not be possible. For this reason at least some Cabinet discussions merit

protection from freedom of information disclosures. Our privacy is important and confidentiality must be respected when a government, legitimately, seeks personal information from us. Writers of letters of reference can be expected to be less candid if they anticipate that confidentiality will not be respected³. The mere threat of WikiLeaks will make officials less inclined to keep records where disclosure would adversely affect their interests. How will future historians gain insight into the thinking, planning and decision-making of our contemporary world if this happens? Other consequential considerations include the outing of pro-US informants, who stand to be brutally treated by the Taliban or other groups who see the informers as spies or betrayers. Besides these consequentialist considerations, there are ethical concerns about breaking one's pledge of confidentiality where this has been given, and the consideration of loyalty to the institution one is paid to serve.

We need to keep track of the different nodal points in assessing the ethics of WikiLeaks. There is the ethical situation of the employee who decides to make use of WikiLeaks as a conduit for 'whistleblowing' for some other, perhaps less laudable, aim than the public good. There is the somewhat different situation of the WikiLeaks organisation when they receive the documents. If they decide whether or not to disseminate documents they have some part of the moral responsibility that goes with editorship. Indeed, one of the criticisms of the WikiLeaks operation is that it exercises considerable political power without the responsibility that goes with elected office. Then there are the media outlets that Assange or others decide to favour with the documents. They have to reckon with the fact that they are cooperating in a process that starts with violation of trust. Finally, in the line of dissemination, we have the general public, that needs to decide how to react to the disclosures.

Ethical considerations don't end with the dissemination process. There is also the matter of how state officials, with or without public support, react to the disclosures. Assange's dissemination of hundreds of thousands of military dispatches, "The War Logs," from Afghanistan and Iraq, and their selective publication in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *Der Spiegel* in late July 2010, led to expressions of outrage in some official quarters⁴. Former GOP House Speaker Newt Gingrich said publication of the WikiLeaks documents on Afghanistan should be considered an "unconscionable" act of treason⁵. Tom Flanagan, a former senior adviser to Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper, reacted to leaks of diplomatic correspondence a few months later by saying he thought it would be fitting to have Assange assassinated. Later he retracted his 'glib' remark, but the full set of words, though stated jocularly, indicates a serious edge at the time he made them⁶. US Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell called Julian Assange "a high-tech terrorist," who "has done enormous damage to our country."⁷

Some credible sources have argued that this kind of reaction is overblown.⁸ For the moment the mere existence of this kind of reaction has immediate repercussions on the ethical enterprise of WikiLeaks, because the real possibility of harm to the original leaker must enter the ethical reckoning. Pvt. Manning, the U.S. army private suspected, on the basis of admissions he made to a confidante by email, of leaking "The War Logs" and other materials has been incarcerated and made to suffer sleep deprivation, psychological intimidation and public humiliation for his alleged acts, in violation of fundamental rights, such as the presumption of innocence, the right not to be tortured, and the right to a fair trial. It appears that the source of the suspicion came from Manning's private correspondence and not from WikiLeaks itself, but the saga shows that risk to the leaker of being found out is always a possibility, despite assurances to the contrary, and has to enter the ethical reckoning. Just as Assange believes that exposing official deceptions will improve democracy, the officially sanctioned power wielders see it as threat to the existing order by an un-elected group and therefore the reverse of democracy. In that light they may view WikiLeaks as subversive and treasonous, meriting any and every means necessary to counter them, constitutional or otherwise⁹. The fact that there are people willing to take extreme measures against the WikiLeaks organisation, is one more thing to take into ethical consideration, even if we consider such measures to be utterly wrong, for multiple reasons.

Before leaving this general overview of the different ethical perspectives on WikiLeaks, a word on the notion of 'deontology' may be helpful. This perspective stands as an alternative to consequentialist reasoning and is epitomized by the Kantian philosophy according to which the obligation to tell the truth is based on rational considerations and is categorical, admitting of no exceptions. Whatever else it may imply, deontology stands for the view that calculation of consequences of actions is not the only criterion for deciding ethical matters.

For the utilitarian, maximising the overall good for the greatest number is the touchstone for evaluating all ethics. Not so for the deontologist, who will allow some actions to be right or obligatory even though they don't maximise the overall good (at least as far as one can tell, without making assumptions about Providence). It needs to be pointed out that, as thus understood, there are different possible deontological positions. Luciano Floridi writes that "A deontologist, convinced that telling the truth and never lying is an absolute must, is likely to appreciate whistleblowing as the right thing to do, independently of the reasons behind it."¹⁰ Here one needs to distinguish between lying, which Kant condemns without exception, with being forthcoming with the truth about anything and everything, which no deontologist has held, to my knowledge, and which is an extremely implausible view. For example, it may be true that we think unkind thoughts about another, but expressing those thoughts is usually uncalled for and is rightly suppressed for the most part. Speaking the truth about another's wrongdoing may indeed be justifiable, but a deontologist, no less than a consequentialist, would have to have good reasons for doing so. Other deontological prescriptions, such as keeping an oath of secrecy, may negate the ethical justification for whistleblowing. For further treatment of general background ethical theory I refer the reader to Marlin (2002). My concern here is with applied ethics, and to the specific issues related to WikiLeaks.

The above is a somewhat incomplete sketch of the parameters of the ethics of WikiLeaks. Enough has been said to indicate some of the complexity of the problem. My purpose in what follows is to forge a coherent, though necessarily tentative appraisal of the ethics of WikiLeaks. I begin by engaging in the next section with the position taken by ethicist Margaret Somerville, and then in the third and final section I provide a very particular, time and context-related, interpretation of the ethics involved. My approach will be as an advocate for a generally favourable evaluation of WikiLeaks, in contrast to the view

treating it as anarchic or traitorous, and likely to subvert democratic institutions, including the state itself.

A critique of Margaret Somerville and the ethics of WikiLeaks

Margaret Somerville (2010) has argued that WikiLeaks, on balance, is a "force for serious harm even allowing that it could entail some good."¹¹ Recognising the difficulty of getting adequate factual information on which good ethical arguments can be based, she nevertheless thinks that there is a growing consensus in the middle ground between views of WikiLeaks as harmless, at one extreme, or as disastrous, at the other, a "9/11 of international diplomacy" possibly leading to world war. This consensus is that WikiLeaks "at the very least, have¹² the potential to cause serious harm to Western nations and their allies to the advantage of their enemies." She is surely right to recognise this possibility, but it needs to be balanced by consideration of the potential to *avert* serious harm, as I will argue in the third section. When wars are initiated on the basis of false information knowingly disseminated to a public that would not otherwise accede to the initiative, disclosure of the deceptions can prevent the war from taking place.

Somerville maintains that the principle that "good ends do not justify wrong means" comes into play in deciding about the ethics of WikiLeaks. The original leaker of the video material known as "Collateral Murder," and the hundreds of thousands of documents known as Afghanistan and Iraq "War Logs," and US diplomatic cables, was in a position of trust. This trust was violated when the materials were passed on to WikiLeaks. Her position is sound as far as it goes:

If we believe that this means of obtaining the information was fundamentally wrong, and that even good ends – let alone seriously harmful ones – do not justify using wrong means, then using that information would be unethical. If, on the other hand, we believe that laudatory ends can justify unacceptable means and we regard the WikiLeaks as having such ends, we might see use of the information as ethical (Somerville 2010).

The problem with this way of presenting the issue is that it can obscure an important possibility, namely that what would normally be wrong means – violation of trust in relation to immediate superiors, to the military and to the US government – may run into conflict with other similar norms of equal or greater weight, such as the obligation to uphold the Constitution. We need to bear in mind that "wrong means" is, at least in some circumstances, a defensible notion, in the sense that some circumstances can not just outweigh the wrong, but can defeat it entirely, meaning that the 'wrong' was only *prima facie* wrong and not wrong at all in the light of further considerations. In the event that one is aware of higher-level deceptions covering up unconstitutional behaviour, then loyalty to the Constitution may ethically *require* revealing these deceptions. It follows that those who believe in the "good ends don't justify wrong means" principle don't necessarily have to give that principle up if they wish to support WikiLeaks.

Following on from her observations about ends and means, Somerville notes that those who cooperate with the WikiLeaks organisation, those mass media that publish material supplied by WikiLeaks, are not just parties coming after the fact to an already accomplished wrongdoing, "[t]hey are playing a direct and active role in that conduct. They are co-evildoers." I believe her to be right about shared responsibility when the initial evil is established, but her view is predicated on the initial wrongness that I have argued might have been defeated, for the reasons given above.

Somerville also points to a need for ethical analysis at different levels, individual, institutional, societal and global. We need to distinguish threats to individuals from threats to a whole society, raising "war and peace" issues. The ethical standards to apply are not always the same. Some moral standards that apply to the individual do not apply to the State, she says. I would suppose she has in mind here such things as the right and duty of the state to punish wrongdoers while individual morality counsels against retaliating against wrongdoing ("turning the other cheek" in Christian morality). The distinction is familiar in a literature that encompasses St. Augustine, Machiavelli, Weber and more recently Michael Walzer and Frank Knopfmacher. It is a distinction fraught with the possibility of encouraging ethically unchecked use of state power, so that making the distinction with no caveat or explanation attached does not seem to me wise.

Somerville's path to a conclusion generally condemnatory of WikiLeaks, begins with an articulation of extremist views that she then proceeds to praise with faint damns. The extreme view sees Assange's conduct as "treason, sedition, sabotage, espionage and terrorism." She quotes David Warren, a columnist for the Canadian daily newspaper the *Ottawa Citizen*, saying he "neatly summed up" the extremist view in calling Assange 'Wiked.' She may not be aware that Warren has in the past shown little respect for "Just War Theory": cheerleading the disproportionate US retaliatory attack on Fallujah, saying the strategy should have been to "make it into a parking lot, and build a Wal-Mart at one end," and urging the US to attack Iran after the initial defeat of Saddam Hussein's forces in Iraq.¹³

Somerville takes issue with those who call for assassination of Assange, but her arguments come with self-doubts that could encourage the extremist. She says State authority could only, if ever, be justified in killing Assange if the order to kill "came within the strict parameters of legitimate self-defence necessary to save human life." That would mean Assange himself would have to pose an "immediate and direct threat to human life" and there would have to be an absence of any less extreme alternative for counteracting that threat. Since Assange could be brought to trial she argues, there is such a less extreme alternative. But she follows this with an observation that the prosecution might not succeed, and that it would face "insurmountable legal hurdles."¹⁴ A further reason she gives for rejecting the idea of state-sponsored assassination is that "we are justified in sidestepping the normal processes of justice and the rule of law," which would "itself be a serious harm to society." This argument has lost force among those who know and accept the many CIA-sponsored extra-legal killings and the most recent killing of Osama bin Laden¹⁵. The rule of law has taken such a hit with Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo, and what have been called "Murder Drone" operations involving the killing of civilians deemed to be enemies, that the spectre of serious harm

resulting from sidestepping the rule of law, is not likely to carry much weight among those who are not already appalled by such actions by the US. Her claim that a state-sponsored order to kill Assange "would involve setting a precedent", read in conjunction with the authorisations given to the CIA to kill Anwar al-Awlaki, is not very persuasive.¹⁶

Following this rather weakly formulated response to the extremist view, Somerville introduces her own flirtation with extremism in the form of a question: "Might Assange's conduct also be characterised as a form of cyber-terrorism?" After all, she writes, WikiLeaks will result in the disruption of diplomatic exchanges that can be crucial to protecting our societies." It could assist our enemies in harming us, and it could harm relationships with our allies. She sees a connection between cyber-terrorism and treason, and a need for updating laws of treason, sedition, etc. to deal with this threat.

Here we come to one of Somerville's key claims. We must ask what threat WikiLeaks poses to our general "social capital," the metaphysical entity that consists of the "norms, networks, and trust [that we rely on] for cooperation and mutual benefit ...[and which] has enormous potential to enable people to act in solidarity for the sake of collective goals"? The clear answer is that it will likely damage every element of it. So even if Assange and his co-leakers are right to claim they do some good, in her view they promote collective harm by depleting social capital, and will likely assist those societies that reject our Western systems of governance, values, and way of life.

As I will argue further in the final section of this paper, it is far from clear that WikiLeaks will create the damage she supposes. The kind of social capital she talks about is already undermined by officials who subvert the rule of law for political ends, who support lying and torturing even though under different names, and who evade accountability. Yes, if you keep these cases under wraps, a deluded population may stay deluded longer. But should we not be thankful to the one who brings the wrongdoing to our attention, even at the cost of greater cynicism about our political leaders and the officials who misrepresent military and diplomatic reality to us? If the wrongdoing is concealed, how can it be rectified?

Somerville is certainly right to claim that openness and transparency, though generally good to have in government and bureaucracy, are not always morally and ethically sound. But that observation by itself alone is not sufficient to condemn WikiLeaks, which claims to be acting for the public good. She allows that avoiding serious harm that can't be avoided any other way would justify breaching privacy, but she says, "the breach of privacy involved in WikiLeaks does not avoid harm. It inflicts it." That may be true, but by her own admission, that doesn't settle the matter for all WikiLeaks. How can she be sure that a small harm involved in a breach of privacy is not offset by revelations of, for example, criminal negligence on the part of our officials with huge harmful repercussions on vast numbers of people in matters of health, safety, fraud, malnutrition, and much else. To say only that WikiLeaks inflicts harm without recognising the potential for remedying some great evils in society seems to be taking an ethically blinkered view.

Somerville claims that Assange and his colleagues have not shown publicly any concern to balance harms against goods, which she says "at the very least, is recklessness." The idea that Assange shows no concern about harms doesn't square with statements made on the WikiLeaks website about the good effects they hope and expect to achieve and their expressed concern to minimise harm.

As the media organisation has grown and developed, WikiLeaks has been developing and improving a harm minimisation procedure. We do not censor our news, but from time to time we may remove or significantly delay the publication of some identifying details from original documents to protect life and limb of innocent people.¹⁷

Assange's concern has also been expressed in interviews. Asked by the German magazine *Der Spiegel* about endangering lives of international troops and their informants in Afghanistan, Assange replied:

The Kabul files contain no information related to current troop movements. The source went through their own harm minimization process, and instructed us to conduct our usual review to make sure there was not a significant chance of innocents being negatively affected. We understand the importance of protecting confidential sources, and we understand why it is important to protect certain US and ISAF sources. ... We identified cases where there may be a reasonable chance of harm occurring to the innocent. Those records were identified and edited accordingly.¹⁸

In summary, Somerville's claim that "overall, WikiLeaks involves grossly unethical conduct, some of which is illegal", seems to me in need of more defence than she provides, and I find the tolerant reception she accords the extreme position condoning extra-legal measures against Assange, unnerving.

Ethics and WikiLeaks in political and historical context

My starting point is that we live in a highly propagandised environment. Public relations and advertising, combined with corporate ownership of the mass media, have greatly influenced how we think and what we think. Lobbyists for major corporations abound in the corridors of power. Their aim is to get the most favourable treatment for their company and its profits, without necessarily being concerned about maximising the public interest. Public relations advisors will alert clients to the dangers of bad publicity and will suggest ways of discrediting sources of negative publicity.¹⁹ Just as information is power, one can see power trying to control information. George Orwell prophetically described the coming of a surveillance society, where different layers of intimidation discourage departure from groupthink.²⁰ With increasing brazenness, it seems, facts are distorted and images manipulated to accomplish government or corporate objectives. The most conspicuous example is the build up to the Iraq war, where the administration of George W. Bush presented a picture of Saddam Hussein as linked to al-Qaeda and the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001, and as having weapons of mass destruction, very soon to include

nuclear bombs, that it was able and prepared to use against the US.²¹

The word 'propaganda' can be used in a neutral or negative sense. I use it here in its commonly understood negative sense, meaning attempts to communicate in such a way as to influence the thought and behaviour of the masses, not through reasoned and fair presentation of evidence, but by methods that obscure the truth and lead a target audience to accept beliefs and attitudes on a basis other than that of sound judgment. Among the methods of propaganda are repetition, selective omission of relevant factual matter, diversion of attention from relevant to irrelevant matters, *ad hominem* attacks, and so on. The excitation of emotions, notably fear and anger, form an important part of the arsenal of the propagandist. Since our judgment must often rest on the credentials of the person from whom we receive our information, a favourite recent form of propaganda has become the use of 'astroturf' ^{Ed 1} or corporate objectives promoted by what look like community supported grass roots movements, but which are in fact sponsored and guided by corporate interests. Propaganda is sometimes identified with 'lies,' but even in the negative sense, it should be recognized that deceptions can be perpetrated by accurate facts, but so selected and presented as to give a wrong impression. One can create stereotypes and reinforce them by simply reporting only those facts that conjure up the stereotype and not those that conflict with it.

The means of controlling information are multiple, wide-ranging and devious, so that it is hard for the general public to avoid being affected by government and corporate propaganda, which may at times combine to reinforce each other. Against this background of information control, the idea that the United States is a genuine democracy is open to serious objection. Without an informed electorate, the mere ability to vote for a candidate hardly represents what is worthy of the name 'democracy.' People have to have an adequate idea of what a candidate stands for, what his or her policies are, and what they are likely to mean for the well-being of the nation. If facts are successfully misrepresented to the public, so that support for a war is based on false fears, the support is not genuinely democratic. No more than is a fraudulent sale of worthless goods representative of a buyer's contractually binding assent. The US Supreme Court ruling in January 2010, *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, No. 08-205, removed the ceiling on corporate election expenditures, thus increasing the power of private interests to affect the vote at election time. As the rich get richer, and the power of the military-industrial-financial complex increases so that wars can be generated more or less at will, there are those, this writer included, who believe that concerted efforts to counteract the propaganda by powerful interests will be needed to give effect to the ideals of democracy.

Against this background, WikiLeaks can enter the information sphere with a reasonable claim to being a necessary counteraction to anti-democratic, (or anti-truth, if one is not wedded to democracy as the sole legitimate form of political rule), forces in the modern world. News and entertainment (combined sometimes as 'infotainment') shape the thought and attitudes of most of us, and influential media bank on 'truthiness' rather than 'truth' to influence the public. Genuine truth often requires expensive investigative reporting to unearth, and effort on the part of the reader or viewer to understand. 'Truthiness,' or a kind of prejudicial gut feeling about what the truth is, tends to be easier and less costly to communicate for conveyor and receiver alike.

WikiLeaks, at least ideally, provides the raw material that the public often needs to form sound judgments. The image of soldiers saving Iraqis from an evil dictator took a severe beating with the leak of the televised sequence known as "Collateral Murder," released early in 2010. We see actual footage of US military personnel in a helicopter expressing eagerness to kill what turn out to be defenceless civilians, including a news reporter and cameraman below. That there was an error of judgment about the nature of the target can be assumed without affecting the overall message that this kind of action is hugely counter-productive, calling into question, when multiplied by many other similar incidents, the whole war mission where the goal was supposedly to win over the hearts and minds of the Iraqi people. "Collateral Murder" can certainly be seen as a kind of propaganda itself, particularly with the commentary added to it by WikiLeaks. The facts selected, and the interpretations placed on them, can all arguably be in need of supplementation by other facts and interpretations. But in a context where such facts and imagery are obscured or ignored completely, the leaked material favours truth in the overall balancing, and importantly so.

It may be felt that WikiLeaks is not necessary because if there were some egregious form of contemplated wrongdoing in government or the corporate world, some brave individual would surely blow the whistle. Against that notion, one needs to reckon with the example of "Operation Northwoods,"²² the name for proposals contained in a Memorandum by the US Joint Chiefs of Staff for Secretary of Defence Robert McNamara and signed by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Lyman Lemnitzer. Dated March 13, 1962, the document sets out a list of possible pretexts for going to war against Cuba. These include false flag operations whereby Cuba gets blamed for attacks on US installations when in fact the attackers are merely dressed in Cuban army gear. Sinking a boat with real or simulated passengers is another suggestion, always with manufactured evidence to make Cuba appear responsible. Elaborate falsely marked planes to implicate Cuba were also proposed.

Had this document been leaked at the time, the pretext for going to war against Vietnam might have been viewed more sceptically in 1964 when the supposed attacks on the destroyers USS Maddox and USS Turner Joy were used to pass a resolution in Congress authorising US President Lyndon Johnson to take military action against North Vietnam, thus commencing the Vietnam War. The document was not revealed to the public until the late 1990s, when use of Freedom of Information brought it to light. That the secret could be so well maintained argues against the likelihood of brave individuals making documents public with the purpose of averting a war. Earlier revelation of the document would likely have increased the resistance to accepting Johnson's Gulf of Tonkin pretext for war, as people would have been sensitised to the use of phony pretexts for war by seeing some of the outrageous deceptions contemplated by the military. If the argument presented here is right, then WikiLeaks stands a good chance of making the waging of war more difficult.

That initiation of a war with Cuba did not take place along lines proposed by Lemnitzer may only be an accident of history.

Later in 1962 with the discovery of Soviet-supplied missiles on Cuban territory, US President Kennedy initiated a blockade and war threatened until an agreement was reached with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev that the missiles would be dismantled and removed so long as the US undertook not to invade Cuba.

War with Iraq – in 1990 - under George H.W. Bush did begin with no small assistance from PR consultants and the false story about Iraqis taking some 312 incubators from Kuwait, emptying the babies and letting them die. The resulting portrayal of Iraqis as monsters helped to firm up opinion against Saddam Hussein and for war to remove Iraqi invaders from Kuwait.

These are all examples where WikiLeaks might have alerted the general population to the deceptions afoot and warned them against accepting the premises for war. Since the stakes are so high – estimates of the number of deaths following the George W. Bush-initiated war in Iraq starting March, 2003, are in the hundreds of thousands – the negative effect of exposing some informant to reprisal actions, pales by comparison. Obviously, this does not settle the issue, since there were unstated as well as stated reasons for that war, and there were many deaths, notably of children, resulting from the previously invoked sanctions against Hussein. But the fact that these other reasons were not presented straightforwardly in the final case for war, and that the false reasons linking Hussein to the events of 9/11 were used instead, is an indication that the democratic process was not respected. WikiLeaks can then contribute to a properly informed electorate and possibly also to avoidance of war following proper consideration of all the genuine reasons for going to war.

Others have made the point that it is hypocritical of government power-wielders to denounce the practice of WikiLeaks when they leak materials all the time, and illegitimately. There were leaks exposing Valerie Plame's covert position with the CIA, seemingly to punish her husband, former Ambassador Joseph C. Wilson, for casting doubt on official accounts regarding Niger's supposed uranium connection with Iraq, in an article he wrote, "What I Didn't Find in Africa," published in *The New York Times*, July 6, 2003.²³

A conspicuous and documented example of leaks by a government agency for the purpose of improving its public profile is found in the Canadian judicial investigation by Dennis O'Connor into the Maher Arar affair²⁴. Canadian intelligence operatives had linked Mr. Arar to terrorist suspects via unreliable evidence obtained under torture and named him as a 'person of interest', leading US. officials to pick him up as he was passing through Kennedy Airport and sending him against his will to Syria in a process known as 'rendition'. Following torture there he admitted to all kinds of contacts with terrorist training camps and the like, all of which he denied later when he was returned to Canada. His damaging admissions were leaked to the media on his return without emphasis on the probative worthlessness stemming from their origin in torture. An obvious motive would be to lower his credibility in the public mind and 'justify' his mistreatment by Canadian intelligence authorities, in other words, to protect the relevant intelligence officials from recrimination. These were clearly self-serving leaks tarnishing the reputation of Mr. Arar, no doubt in an effort to improve the lustre of their own.

Of course, one unethical set of leaks doesn't justify another. But in a hypothetical clash between leakers, those that would expose the wrongdoing of other leakers bent on sacrificing the good name of others for their personal benefit, are clearly in an ethically superior position to those whose wrongdoing they expose, assuming other variables to be comparable.

Conclusion

In a context where democracy has suffered from the skewing of information processes by those with money and power, and where as Jay Rosen has noted, "the Watchdog Press has died",²⁵ some drastic means are needed to push back against the increasing inequalities favouring the very rich against the middle and poorer classes. Seen in this context, the potential of WikiLeaks to restore a measure of justice in the world seems welcome. We can expect a sustained attempt to discredit the WikiLeaksers, taking the form of giving widespread attention to the personal faults and foibles of those involved in the activity, and paying maximal attention to harms resulting from ill-considered and unjustified leaks. The risks are great, and entail a need for circumspection and ethical sensitivity on the part of the WikiLeaksers. But so are the potential benefits, and the WikiLeaks phenomenon should be seen in that light.

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Footnotes

1. A Google search of "Ethics of WikiLeaks" provides an ample sampling. As of September 4, 2011 the first listed was Radford (2010).

2. As quoted in Mitchell (2011), Daniel Ellsberg: "There has been a concerted attempt to paint Bradley Manning as a terrorist and traitor. He is neither. He is a patriotic American who deserves better than to be tried in the media ...before he has had any opportunity to speak publicly for himself or to present his own case in court." See also Nadia Prupis (2011), quoting Ellsberg: "Bradley Manning is acting in the interest of the United States and against the interest of our enemy al Qaeda." See also Ellsberg (2011).

3. An example I take from Floridi (2010).

4. See Keller (2011).

5. News-Max.com, July 31, 2010 [accessed June 28, 2011]. <http://www.newsmax.com/InsideCover/WikiLeaks-newt-gingrich-treason/2010/07/31/id/366209>

6. "Flanagan regrets WikiLeaks assassination remark," CBC News, December 1, 2010 [accessed June 28, 2011]. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/story/2010/12/01/flanagan-WikiLeaks-assange.html>.

7. See Tom Curry, "McConnell optimistic on deals with Obama". MSNBC. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/40517039/ns/politics/40516927.msnbc.com/5/12/2010>.

8. As reported by Ralph Nader (2010), Thomas Blanton, director of National Security Archive at George Washington University, testified before the House Judiciary Committee December 16, to Washington's "hyper-reaction" to WikiLeaks and to its "Wikimania." See also Nancy A. Youssef (2010): despite US officials' warnings that documents released by WikiLeaks could put people's lives in danger, they conceded that "they have no evidence to date that the documents led to anyone's death."

9. The theoretical basis for this kind of response can be found in Frank Knopfelmacher (1976).

10. See Luciano Floridi (2010).

11. See Margaret Somerville (2010).

12. "WikiLeaks" is here used as a plural noun. I treat the word as either singular or plural, depending on whether it refers to the organization or phenomenon (singular) or the materials leaked to or by the organization (plural). In the case of one such document, the word "WikiLeak" seems appropriate.

13. See Carol Wainio's complaint to the Ontario Press Council, and the Council's ruling. http://www.canada.com/story_print.html?id=85ab6d9d-b07b-4cfa-a929-c5d6c983e45b&sponsor= [accessed 6/9/11].

14. The quotation marks are in Somerville's text.

15. I assume here both that the killing took place, as witnessed by US President Obama by video in Washington, and that the opportunity existed for the Navy Seals to have taken him into custody and brought to trial by appropriate authorities.

16. See Glenn Greenwald (2010). It is true that Assange is not a US citizen, but perhaps that gives him less in the way of enforceable rights against assassination, if we consider the way citizens in Afghanistan, Yemen and elsewhere have been targeted and killed.

17. See <http://www.WikiLeaks.org/About.html> [accessed 6/9/2011].
18. Published July 26, 2010 in Spiegel Online, downloaded from <http://www.commondreams.org/headline/2010/07/26-0> (accessed 4/9/11).
19. See Wendell Potter (2010) for a good insider's view on workings of this kind as they relate to the medical insurance business.
20. See Yeo, Michael (2010).
21. See especially reports in the media February 6, 2003, on US Secretary of State Colin Powell's presentation to the United States Security Council the day before.
22. The original document is easily accessible at www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/news/20010430/northwoods.pdf.
23. For more on this, see Joseph C. Wilson's 2004 memoir *The Politics of Truth* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2004).
24. Justice O'Connor's Report on Maher Arar can be accessed at www.pch.gc.ca/cs-kc/arar/Arar_e.pdf.
25. See Jay Rosen on WikiLeaks, "The Watchdog Press Died; We Have This Instead," FAIR, Dec. 2, 2010. <http://fairwhistleblower.ca/content/jay-rosen-WikiLeaks-watchdog-press-died-we-have-instead>.

Editorial Note

- 1 Astroturf is a form of synthetic grass used in sports stadiums across North America. (Ed Note)

About the Author

Randal Marlin is an Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at Carleton University, Ottawa. He has explored philosophical questions relating to propaganda since the 1970s, and continues to teach a course, "Truth and Propaganda" in the department. He has published a book, a collection of essays, and numerous academic and popular articles relating to the topic. He was Guest Editor for the December, 2010 issue of *Global Media Journal - Canadian Edition* on "Propaganda, Ethics and Media." He is a Board member of the International Jacques Ellul Society and has served for many years on the executive of the Civil Liberties Association, National Capital Region, currently as Academic Director.

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