How WikiLeaks will transform mainstream media

Presentation by Kristinn Hrafnsson, WikiLeaks spokesperson and investigative journalist

Ladies and gentlemen, scholars, friends and colleagues. It has become somewhat fashionable to characterize an issue as the greatest moral challenge of our time. Experience to date suggests the use of such an absolute is fraught: that one person's great moral challenge, even if mandated by a prime minister, can and will be challenged, piled apart and ultimately trashed in the absence of consensus or the presence of vehement and well-organized oppositional forces. It is for that reason I temper my language – one of the many great moral challenges of our time is whether or not we should trust government? That, I think, is the core question posed by WikiLeaks and its mediation into the public space of government 'owned' secrets. It is one we our speaker tonight, Kristinn Hrafnsson, a spokesman for WikiLeaks addresses on a daily basis and why this evening's talk is so important, in terms of both timing and content.

Journos love leaks. They are thrilling and they are necessary. They allow us to fulfill the unwritten, unspoken and often unexamined contract between the media and the public: in essence, that journalists work in the interests of the public to shine a light on the truth and in doing so, without fear or favour, make those in power more accountable for their actions and decisions. Sometimes, such exposure changes policy and outcomes; in the journalists' mind, these changes are always for the better – especially at the point of publication.

Every journalist who receives a leak will balance up the potential of the information leaked – its capacity to foster or provoke change – with the more vexed question – the motivation of the leaker. Eight, maybe, nine times out of ten this question will be decided in favour of the leaker. The leaked information once appropriate checks and related issues – such as the opportunity for a rebuttal – are dealt with.

The urge to publish is strong and difficult to deny. But from time to time, the leaked information will never see the light of the day or may remain in an editor's working room as issues of accuracy or motivation are dealt with.

And there are a lot of grey areas out there: political 'insiders', for instance, are often dressed up as leaks, the source playing up to the journalistic vanity of getting a good yarn and letting the public know about some indiscretion which means so and so is no longer fit to hold office. Or they may be part of a political strategy to gradually erode public confidence in an MP or organisation and their decision-making abilities. These allegations can – and often should – reach the public arena, sometimes in a mediated or qualified form.

Often they do not. I recently knocked back information that sought to prove the partner of a well known politician had broken certain business regulations. The story, even if true, was not to my mind in the interest of public.

Editing is a process replete with human failings and bias, I would have to admit, but imperfect as editing is there are ethical standards and guidelines. With due deference to the Press Council, we are largely a self-regulated mob – but our practices and approaches are forged over decades of practice and experience.

The same, I'm afraid, can't always be said of those who wear the mantle of the journalist in the new media space – where every one can claim to be a journalist or an editor or publisher. WikiLeaks brings these issues – and many more related ones -- into sharp relief and then takes the whole question of secrecy and its exposure to another level. Its contribution to free speech is undeniable. For that it should be applauded and lauded.

As editor when the Herald first published Wiki's Australian-related cables – and now editor-in-chief and publisher – I have no qualms about defending the publication of the documents it has obtained in the interests of freedom of speech and in the public interest. But that said, how do we define that public interest, how do we distinguish between the interests of different publics and groups, is as important as ever.

There is also no denying that WikiLeaks has helped protect journalistic sources – better than we can in the absence of shield laws that work in every state and jurisdiction – and exposed the abuse of power by governments around the world. But is there a limit? I accept that WikiLeaks does not hide, but it is fair to say it endorses the hackers' desire to expose and share – everything. By publishing WikiLeaks am I agreeing with the view that government is a conspiracy and that only by exposing its inner workings – all the speculation, opinions, chats, theories and personal views – will it ever better serve the public interest?

Is all government a conspiracy, populated and prosecuted by an elite class of bureaucrats and politicians solely motivated by the exercise of power and their own reflection in its mirror? I am deeply perplexed by this question, as, among many others things, it goes to the very heart of the way political journalism is practiced in this and most other Western democracies.

I have spoken to many MPs about Wikileaks but one conversation with a senior political identity, who was none too impressed to be so. He first raised the idea that we had somehow defamed him – we had not – but his real argument was more subtle. As he noted, he had been a real and valuable source for many journalists over the years, a constant wellspring of deep and important background briefings. These briefings had always been conducted under the conditions of an unwritten pact – the sort of "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" which fuels the world of political journalism go round.

My MP saw this as part of his function in life – to provide insight into the workings of government and party, alike – but felt disinclined to do so ever since we had so badly treated him. He threatened to cut off the flow of information.

Now, as you’ll appreciate, the idea of a politician threatening a journo for going too far – or not far enough -- is nothing new and neither is the idea that even the most-frosty relationships eventually thaw. It is called mutual self-interest. But the rawness of the information contained in WikiLeaks – and its somewhat wild, personal and uncontrollable nature – proved a real threat to the relationship between journalist and MP.

That WikiLeaks is a threat to this cosy relationship is, perhaps, a good thing – but it is not one without consequence and not just for the cloistered world of political journalism. The questions for me are thus: would we have more secrecy – rather than less – if all the workings of the machinery of government can be exposed? And if so, would this make the job of journalism much harder and provoke my profession to take even greater and greater risks – and to potentially cross the line between public and private – in the name of doing its...
Thank you. Thank you for inviting me here. This is my first time to Australia and my first serious experience with jetlag as well. When I arrived here, I came out of the terminal, it was windy, it was raining, it was about fourteen degrees Celsius. There was an ice cloud high in the sky so I felt just fine at home on a good Icelandic summer day.

Now this is very controversial in Iceland and it still is debated and to tell you the truth I don’t see whatever in the relations between the IMF and the Icelandic government needs to be a secret. And I as a citizen and a taxpayer in Iceland, I feel a need to have a full account of all the information for reporting to media and to the IMF. Nothing in the relations between these entities is in the [inaudible] business category and in my opinion the same applies to the citizens in Greece and all other countries that have dealings with the IMF.

It is their fundamental democratic right. In one news story I read, one reason for the supposed seriousness of this incident was that the sensitive correspondence between the IMF staff and state leaders could be very damaging. But what on earth could be damaging—would that be an email from the Prime Minister of Greece to Strauss-Kahn, that former head of the IMF?

And how would that even read? I mean what could be sensitive there? Would it be “Dear Dominique, thank you for visiting our country, I hope you enjoyed our hospitality and our hotel staff is very nice,” or “Let’s be serious. What on earth can be there that is sensitive between these two entities?

I’ve seen quite a few articles on this story and I’m amazed by the fact that I’ve not seen a single one that critically asks the fundamental question—why the need for secrecy? And even the left wing Independent fails to ask this question.

The reason is probably the fact that we have become so accustomed to the norm of secrecy—secrecy in governments and secrecy by other holders of powers, big international corporations, and so forth. This secrecy has become the norm instead of being a rare exception.

This secrecy trend has escalated in recent times, all under the assumption that it is totally necessary for us, the citizens, to be kept ignorant; necessary for our own security. But at WikiLeaks we disagree. We believe it is fundamental in a democratic society that citizens have access to all relevant information that they need to make an informed decision. If we the people do not have this access, democracy is flawed and we know that power is abused. The more secrecy we have, the greater the danger is of abuse.

A few words on WikiLeaks—it’s an organisation founded by Julian Assange, as you all know, back in 2006, and before the turbulent chapter in its history that started about fourteen months ago, WikiLeaks had published information from many countries, often uncovering corruption. These were materials pertaining to the Kenyan Government, the Church of Scientology, the failed Icelandic banks, the Bank of Julius Baer, toxic waste dumping in the Ivory Coast and the list goes on.

Despite the importance of this information and its revelations, the revelations were relatively unnoticed. This of course changed when we started publishing material pertaining to the US military and the US State Department.

And then subsequently, WikiLeaks was criticised for being anti-American and overly focused on the United States, but nothing is further from the truth. WikiLeaks does not pick targets; it is a passive recipient of material that whistleblowers can submit securely and anonymously.

Today we have about 15 or 20 people on the payroll. I don’t have the accurate number as some are working on a short-term basis and others on a long-term contract so this varies.

So, it’s a small organisation... about the supposed lack of transparency in the organisation and critics point out that people who work for WikiLeaks are not known.

A few of us who work for the organisation are known but that is true, that the identity of most is protected.

And how would that even read? I mean what could be sensitive there? Would it be “Dear Dominique, than...
The experience of the collateral murder release prompted us to rethink media strategy. It seemed that the best way of getting good analyses of our material was to make alliances with established media and promise them some level of exclusivity. And so we did in the next release and it caused quite a stir – the so-called Afghan war diary – the release of over 90,000 incident and intelligence reports from the Afghan war.

The release was in cooperation with three media partners – The Guardian, The New York Times and the German weekly Der Spiegel. Fifteen thousand of the logs were withheld in order to protect individuals who could be identified.

This was the biggest leak in US military to its own forces. It gave a detailed picture of the war from 2003 to 2010. It revealed also the kill and capture unit of special forces who were hunting and killing Taliban leaders without trial, how the use of drones was increasing, how the occupation in Afghanistan was escalating the resistance with roadside bombs, previously unreported civilian deaths – in short, it showed how the military venture in Afghanistan had been going from bad to worse over the years.

The invasion was a response for the 9/11 attacks, where more than 2,900 people were killed but to date, more than 2,500 foreign troops have been killed in Afghanistan and more than 35,000 civilians.

The Afghan war diary told a terrible story that we had not before had first hand evidence of – the story of a failed mission and just like the Soviets experienced before, there seems to be no victory to be had in this battered land.

I’m not an expert on Afghanistan, I have only been there twice, but element that I always feel is missing in our reporting from the country is the escalation of the poppy growth and heroin production. Ninety-five per cent of the heroin sold on Western streets originates from Afghanistan and according to the UN agencies, 10,000 people die every year of a heroin overdose in Western cities.

That is three times more than died on September 11th. With that in mind, I’ve always thought it almost surreal to see photos of Western troops wading through the poppy fields, trying to find the enemy in the haze of poppy plants. I think that all of the proceeds of that drug trade mass are gone as well, that at least some of the proceeds fund the Taliban{.}

All went pretty well in the cooperation with the media partner last summer – the tainted one. The Times came as a surprise to me though. It was obvious that they were genuinely uncomfortable with putting themselves in opposition to the government by publishing this material.

And for one, who I’ll always thought that The New York Times was a powerhouse of journalism, was this the New York Times of the early seventies when the paper took on the Nixon administration by publishing the Pentagon Papers from Daniel Ellsberg and this was exactly forty years ago.

And I’m still not sure whether the paper was primarily afraid of repercussions or whether they simply did not want to upset a cozy relationship with Washington, and maybe it was a combination of both.

The New York Times did not want to be the first to publish the material online, even though as a matter of seconds, it was rather odd, as media organisations usually are fighting to be the first, fighting for the ISSN.

We at Wikileaks were delayed by a technical problem and this caused a great tension within the New York Times. They had their fingers on the go button but waited anxiously for Wikileaks to publish first.

Wikileaks’ approach was to use these established media houses to get the message out, to get access to the dozens of quality journalists who analyse the vast material and mine stories out of it.

We considered this co-operation on a base of equality. It was agreed that Wikileaks had a great say in the strategy of the release as the organisation was obviously going to take the heat for the release. But it not the paper’s place in the end to make the public think that The Guardian and The New York Times things differently, for Bill Keller, the editor of The New York Times, and David Lee at The Guardian, Wikileaks was primarily a source. What was disturbing though, that those guys did not feel the same obligations towards their sources, as one is officially supposed to do as a journalist in my opinion. And this became apparent in September last year prior to the release of the Iraq war diary.

We wanted to expand the media exposure and get broadsheets on board. Originally was met with opposition as the three print media thought they had agreed to full exclusivity.

But Julian had to remind them that exclusivity was limited to print. We got the Bureau of Investigative Journalism on board as a producer of television programs for Al Jazeera and Channel 4 in the UK. The Swedish National Television also made their own program but worked in close proximity to the Bureau.

At a later stage, the French daily Le Monde came on board and also El Pais of Spain. This created a media co-operation on a scale never tried before in the UK. This was a historic leak and the news that the paper thought they had agreed to full exclusivity.

There were throughout very professional I must say – they shared great news stories that had been missed by others. In later August, early September it became obvious to us that we needed to postpone the release of the Iraq logs originally planned to be released in mid-September. The primary reason was that we were working on a complicated method of redacting sensitive material out of the logs.

The approach was rather unique as it entailed defining on the outset that all the information in the vast material would be considered harmful until proven otherwise. This could be called reverse process of redaction.

David Lee at The Guardian had for reasons of simplicity been given the role of an intermediary with The New York Times and Der Spiegel. David was against the delay and played a rather silly political game in trying to stop it.

All of this is of course not mentioned in his book about this project. There was even a threat to publish the stories without Wikileaks being able to publish it was based upon the same time – something was against our principles.

And Lee was not at all concerned at this time about the interests of his media partner Wikileaks, if or if he was to choose to as look at Wikileaks as primarily source, he did not see any objections to compromising the source if it suited his interest. He even tried to play a game of poker by trying to convince me it was actually The New York Times and Der Spiegel who did not want to delay – a bluff that I called by simply contacting directly Bill Keller and the editor of The New York Times, and Bill was not at all concerned at this time about the interests of his media partner Wikileaks, or how others might find the publication of the Iraq war diary.

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out, not always in the best of manners – often dodgy deals are made or even threats. The cables have made diplomatic relations more transparent. The cables have also brought to light the usual information from the host countries – useful and necessary for the people of the countries.

It has to be said that the US Embassy staff had been agile in their information gathering role and had been in a good position to analyse the internal politics and economics rather well in the countries they are operating in.

It has been suggested that the Cablegate could have devastating effects on countries’ relations, people would no longer be able to have confidential talks based on trust but I believe this is a hyped assumption and instead we will have possibly already seen a more frank and open dialogue between state leaders and that is the way it should be. Last week for example, the US Defense Secretary Robert Gates was in Europe meeting partners in NATO – the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation – and it made headlines that he openly and without any superfluous handwringing criticized the European partners for not pitching enough into the cooperation, and everybody knew that he was on course referring to Afghanistan.

And I wonder if we would have been as blunt openly in a world prior to WikiLeaks. The critics of WikiLeaks have as before been quick to denounce the importance of the cable release. This is nothing new, they have said, although our media partners disagree.

And try telling this to the Tunisians. When the Tunisian cables started to surface in early December, they were translated and disseminated to the public in Tunisia. Stories were made on their basis by Al Jazeera at that time that the Zone of National Ben Ali government was corrupt. But the extent of their corruption, with detailed example was news to many. And maybe most importantly it was news that the out of the State Department knew exactly what kind of leader Ben Ali was but still it was supporting him as a useful ally.

The Tunisians did not like what they read and the mese escalated the fury already in place in the country. It was the tragic death of a young journalist, Mohammed al-Bouazizi, who set himself on fire that tipped the balance. He died on January 4th and on January 14th Ben Ali and his family fled the country.

And the Tunisian episode was an inspiration to the Egyptians. Information in Egyptian cables about internal matters of the country fanned the flames. There was a big demand for Hosni Mubarak to step down. The United States thought they could interfere by suggesting that Suleiman would replace president Mubarak, but cables showed that he had been responsible for the torture chambers in the country – did away with that possibility.

And the so-called “Arab Spring” has spread. Amnesty International has acknowledged WikiLeaks role as a catalyst in the chain of events and dedicated a good part of the introduction in the last annual report to discuss the exciting possibilities of the Internet and information leaks. It concluded that last year might be remembered as a watershed year when activists and journalists used new technology to speak truth to power, and in so doing had pushed for greater respect for human rights.

I’ve not mentioned the release of the Guantanamo files, the reports on almost all the prisoners in Guantanamo Bay, showing for example how appallingly bad information was used as a basis of years of imprisonment without trial and often information received through torture, leading to boys as young as fourteen and men being imprisoned for years. And Guantanamo is surely a black mark on US history.

So, WikiLeaks has made an impact in our world. It has been a catalyst in the profound changes happening now in the Arab world. The leaks have deepened our understanding of the world we live in. It has excited the ordinary people who were losing hope in their government systems and the media. WikiLeaks has shown the traditional media that they were not doing the job properly in my opinion and needed to make amends after rather a bleak performance in the last decade or two. The idea WikiLeaks represents has sparked the imagination and hope of people who really believe in democracy. They see finally the possibilities of the Internet delivering a better life for more people through empowerment on the basis of information dissemination.

But so has WikiLeaks changed the world of journalism? Let me give you a few examples. I think it has changed the traditional media and in doing so has made journalists braver. Our work has rejuvenated journalists in a crucial way to allow a free and open and watchdog of a free society. WikiLeaks has revolutionised the traditional media by partnering with more than seventy-five traditional newspapers and other media outlets. It has forged a new model for how the media can work together in a collaborative way and just not just reporting in the public interest, not just in reporting the public interest.

I believe we have encouraged the spread of data journalism – sophisticated analysis or large scale data such as thousands of war logs to understand the bigger picture. Same sort of work an intelligence agency does, but the fruits are given to all the people of society, not locked in some hidden vault.

And WikiLeaks has enhanced the spread of new media. More than 20 new leak sites have sprung up in the wake of WikiLeaks, including zadokleaks, Balkanleaks Thaileaks, Enviroleaks, Unileaks and OpenLeaks. And now even the Wall Street Journal is copying the way WikiLeaks uses technology to protect sources, and maybe not successfully.

And Al Jazeera has done the same, leading them to acquire the Palestinian Papers – a leak they actually shared with The Guardian. After practising journalism for 25 years, I was getting less and less impressed with my profession, I was about to give up. The idea WikiLeaks represents has made me believe that journalism can again become an element that makes our world a better one. I believe it was Victor Hugo said that knowing nothing was as powerful an an idea whose time had come and it should make us feel good to know that there are still ideas to be found that can have a greater impact for good, a greater impact than any military misadventure.

Let me finally quote an Australian editor, who in the mid-fifties was defending his paper’s right to publish secret documents. He wrote in a race between truth and secrecy, truth will always win... and this was your very own Rupert Murdoch.

Thank you very much.

Peter Fray: I think that WikiLeaks does challenge journalism and the way we think about secrets and the way, as we’ve discussed tonight, the relationship between governments and the media is conducted and I agree with a lot of what Kristinn has said. I believe that it has perhaps taken journalism across the planet, away from its perhaps cosy – as we’ve discussed – relationship with government. I think that relationship – as I tried to explain in my introduction – is understandable. I do wonder around the question of the information that WikiLeaks provides us and I’d like to hear some questions on this subject.

Can you have too much information? Question one.

Does that information simply just need to be put out there in the public space and let people make up their own minds about it, do you need journalists in that respect?

I think WikiLeaks has stayed in a very interesting middle ground around that and I have every appreciation of Kristinn’s description of it as “herding cats”.

I think there’s an interesting question around the impact of the information and the way the information is shared with... and this was your very own Rupert Murdoch.

Well that’s an interesting approach but I think when we look at it, you cannot find the truth without the facts. So if it’s a philosophical question whether you know truth are facts or facts are truth, but at least I think you need to have the facts out to be able to figure out the truth.

Peter Fray: I believe we have a second question.

Audience question: It seems that journalists are facing a dilemma nowadays: on the one hand we try to turn to the government for more convincing sources but on the other hand I think government tend to fail the expectations from the public on the credibility thing due to their corruption, with detailed example was news to many. And maybe most importantly it was news that the US Embassy knew exactly what kind of leader Ben Ali was but still it was supporting him as a useful ally.

What can WikiLeaks do for a solution and – as an investigative journalist – how do you think WikiLeaks be used to solve this problem?

Kristinn Hrafnsson: We should always question the government.

We should always question the government. We have too many examples where you look at what we have been facing in Saddam Hussein because he was torturing his own people. What we find out afterwards: that we replaced Saddam Hussein with another guy who has continued to torture his own people. I mean, we failed in the running up to the Iraq invasion. We should have been alert to the bluff – to point out the obvious lies that were being exposed.

Peter Fray: That’s an interesting point. It happened to be the London correspondent for The Herald and The Age when the report came out about the alleged weapons of mass destruction. I would say 95 per cent of the journalists at the time rushed off to print, that there were bombs going to hit Britain in four minutes or whatever the time frame was. At that point in time, you had to trust the government.

Kristinn Hrafnsson: But why did we have to trust the government?

Peter Fray: Well, maybe we don’t.

Kristinn Hrafnsson: We should always question the government.

Peter Fray: That’s an interesting question.

Kristinn Hrafnsson: Because governments lie to us you know, all the time. We can’t trust these guys.
Peter Fray: So far enough, but what would be the alternative then? A government report came out but we don’t believe in it?

Kristinn Hrafnsson: Well I’m not an expert on weapons of mass destruction and I’m not an expert on Iraq but I’m sure we could have found an expert who could have questioned these allegations at the time.

Peter Fray: Well I think there were efforts to do [X]

Kristinn Hrafnsson: We were too eager to take at face value the sensational story. There have been so many stories of that nature, you know, the throwing babies out of the window in Iraq in 2003 in the Gulf War, a fabricated horror for garner support.

Peter Fray: Do you believe that’s because we in the media desperately want to simplify things such that it’s always good versus evil? It makes it easy for us.

Kristinn Hrafnsson: It might be one of the reasons that we are always so, too eager to have, for example, jumped on a scoop if it’s handed to us.

Audience question: It’s great to see someone other than Julian Assange fronting WikiLeaks I must say and I really enjoy your unpacking of the editorial move from passive recipients of whistleblowers information through to reverse redaction, where you’re actually having to sit back and work out what you can release without harming anyone. That seems to be quite a jump in editorial thinking. I’m wondering if you could tell us how WikiLeaks editorial values are fundamentally different from the media organisations that you’ve been with. You indicated that you weren’t very happy with the way that journalists were handling sources, for example. So how is WikiLeaks fundamentally editorially different?

Kristinn Hrafnsson: Well, I was painting out this incident to point out that, at that time, I had really the hard task of trying to convince The Guardian not to reach an agreement.

And if this is heavily edited, you know, I don’t know what heavily edited is. There is almost a 12 minute sequence without any editing, with a few comments at the beginning. But we also produced and put online the entire 45 minute sequence in the video. That’s one difference.

Audience question: I was just hoping that you could shed some light on the way that you decide which leaks to publish, because I’d imagine and Daniel [Daniel Domscheit-Berg, author of Inside WikiLeaks: My Time with Julian Assange at the World’s Most Dangerous Website] indicated in Inside WikiLeaks that you do get a lot of leaks. What’s the process that you go through?

Kristinn Hrafnsson: You shouldn’t read Daniel’s book. It’s ridiculous. It’s mostly been ridiculed but I haven’t even read it but all the reviews mention that two highlights of the book are that Julian stole his chocolate powder mix to make drinks and that he played too hastily with his co-saffre from psychosia as a result of this. I’ve never seen Julian harm an animal, even though he lives in Norfolk, there are a lot of animals there.

How to decide what is published and what is not?

Kristinn Hrafnsson: It’s a very good question but it’s hard to answer it without relying on some examples. But I disagree with linking our governments in fundamentally the same way as private enterprises. I mean there are other concerns when it comes to governments.

Peter Fray: It seems that it has to be balanced. The benefits of keeping it secret possibly and getting it out, is something that has to be evaluated and I think on almost all occasions, the evaluation would be on the side of getting the information to the people. I’ve been covering the IMF a lot in Ireland. I’ve been thinking about what on earth could be there and what on earth could be in the negotiations between IMF and Greece, for example, that is sensitive. I mean in it about the selling of resources, the water company – which is a very heated debate about so it might hurt the possibility of getting the highest value for the national power company of Greece when it’s sold out and rationalised because the discussion was known. But the people have a right to know this being planned and being possibly suggested by the IMF. So you understand my meaning, it’s something that has to be weighed.

Peter Fray: We’ll move on, next question.

Audience question: I’m interested in your viewpoint on what you saw as the emphasis on Julian and Julian Assange’s trial and the tribulations of his in the New York Times. It’s a mixture of both, but we just can’t change the reality of the media world.

Kristinn Hrafnsson: Well, it’s a mixture of both, but we just can’t change the reality of the media world. It irritated Julian greatly when there was this sensational emphasis on Julian’s story back in May, June, last year. To the point that he denied to give any interviews unless there was a focus on what WikiLeaks was doing and what it was publishing, not on himself. He didn’t like that at all.

Peter Fray: Next question.

Audience question: My first question was to be – you are looking to distribute information without the press? My next question is – have you seen any change in the press once WikiLeaks came to being, and how is your relationship with the press?

Kristinn Hrafnsson: Well there’s certainly been a change in the relations with the press, and I feel that there’s more and more acceptance of what we are presenting in the press. There was a lot of scepticism to start with. Journalists and the media saw us as attacking their turf.

Peter Fray: You wanted to jump in with a quick question here. I actually enjoyed your unpacking of The New York Times running a very critical commentary piece or profile piece about Julian. I can understand why they did that. I’m not necessarily endorsing it but I can understand why they did it. They were worried as you say that they might feel like The New York Times has sold its soul to WikiLeaks. I was interested in what your opinion on what you saw as the emphasis on Julian and Julian Assange’s trial and the tribulations of his in Sweden. Is that a positive or a negative do you think in terms of the organisation?

Kristinn Hrafnsson: Well, it’s a mixture of both, but we just can’t change the reality of the media world. It irritated Julian greatly when there was this sensational emphasis on Julian’s story back in May, June, last year. To the point that he denied to give any interviews unless there was a focus on what WikiLeaks was doing and what it was publishing, not on himself. He didn’t like that at all.

Peter Fray: Next question.

Kristinn Hrafnsson: I don’t necessarily think that journalists will have to compromise any ethics but they are certainly more critical and maybe seek out actively to be more – call forward information of this nature. It remains to be seen how this will affect actually leaks in the future, whether there’s going to be a flow of information. But we can also encourage it by legal means. I’m impressed by the initiative by media here have come together in the campaigning that they’re doing – “the right to know.” I think it’s a very impressive initiative. Also, protecting whistleblowers. We as journalists should be active in the field of forming these kinds of policies and thereby opening up the gateway for more, a flood of information. Let’s hope so.

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was wondering about what would you recommend that we as ordinary people do to find the truth?

Kristinn Hrafnsson: It's a political question. Iceland went to total economic meltdown in 2008 and despite the fact that a year earlier, we topped the list of Transparency International, which is a total joke. I sent an email to Transparency International, I said how on earth could you measure [transparency].

They never replied. I mean we basically suffered banking fraud on a phenomenal scale. The banks were ten times as big as the country's economy; ten times the turnover than the GDP of the country. So, the entire collapse was great. What people obviously did, they went out on the streets and they demanded total transparency. But we had to learn the hard way. Now there is legislative reform, the media, and even the constitution is being rewritten because we saw that our democracy was flawed. People went to the streets in Iceland, threw stones at the parliament, threatened to burn it up, it was a real possibility in a country that has no history of political violence, where people rarely, you know, go out to demonstrate.

Audience question: Have you or any member of WikiLeaks ever felt in danger?

Kristinn Hrafnsson: Yes, of course. It is quite a serious threat when you have political commentators and politicians urging for the assassination of, you know, your editor, when it comes to Julian. And people of the organisation being hunted down like terrorists.

You know, you feel a sense of threat but it shouldn't intimidate you. I think if you ask me personally, I have not seriously felt that I was in danger because of working with WikiLeaks but I will not fly through, you know, Kennedy airport in the time being. So, I'd have to take my children to Disney World in Paris instead of Florida if they can twist my arm to take them to Disney World at all.

Audience question: I wanted to ask you a question and I hope you don't find this offensive, but Julian is often referred to in the media as a journalist and I know that you are a journalist yourself by background, but I do question where you draw that line between source mediator and journalist?

Kristinn Hrafnsson: Well, I basically draw the line of what people are doing, if they are abiding by journalistic rules and practising journalism. A lot of my colleagues and the past journalists that I know have no journalistic training and didn't go to uni to get a degree in journalism. But if they abide by the principle of journalism, what I believe are the basic principles, they have a right to call themselves journalists, if they are working in the field.

Audience question: (Follow up previous question): But in terms of end product, I mean as a website that mainly produces sources that would be used by third parties to write stories for example. Do you think that we can expand the genre of journalism to include what is effectively making sure that sources are fair, which is what I understand you to do?

Kristinn Hrafnsson: Well, I think prior to the beginning of the big releases, starting last year, I think WikiLeaks was doing more journalism than actually it has been doing since in a sense, because it was not relying on the cooperation with the traditional media I mean there was the element of receiving information that had to be analysed and put into some context and put on the website with a summary, with basically a report written on the material.

But with the massive information that we've been working on for the last fourteen months, we have delegated that somewhat in the cooperation with the traditional media.

Audience member: Okay. Thank you.

End Q & A