

This House believes the world is better off with WikiLeaks

What is WikiLeaks?

WikiLeaks is a whistle-blowing website which was founded in December 2006 by its Editor in Chief, Julian Assange. Since its inception WikiLeaks has established a reputation for publishing sensitive material from governments and other high-profile organisations. According to the group's website:

"WikiLeaks is a non-profit media organisation dedicated to bringing important news and information to the public. We provide an innovative, secure and anonymous way for independent sources around the world to leak information to our journalists. We publish material of ethical, political and historical significance while keeping the identity of our sources anonymous, thus providing a universal way for the revealing of suppressed and censored injustices."

In 2008, the group released documents suggesting that the government of Kenya had looted its country and in Spring 2010, it released a 2007 video from Baghdad in which a US helicopter fired on a group of civilians, killing twelve including two employees of the Reuters news agency.

In July 2010, the group began a partnership with mainstream media organisations including The New York Times. It gave selected publications a preview of the so-called Afghan War Diary which consisted of 90,000 records of incidents and intelligence reports of the war in Afghanistan. The logs detailed among other things how coalition forces have killed hundreds of civilians in unreported incidents, Taliban attacks have soared and Nato commanders fear neighbouring Pakistan and Iran are fuelling the insurgency.

A grim picture of the legacy of US and UK military activity in Iraq was subsequently revealed in October 2010 when WikiLeaks released almost 400,000 secret US logs detailing its operations in the country. These included revelations that the US authorities failed to investigate hundreds of reports of abuse, torture, rape and even murder by Iraqi police and soldiers, and that more than 15,000 civilians had died in previously unknown incidents.

Unprecedented release of secret documents

On November 28 2010, WikiLeaks began publishing a series of more than 250,000 diplomatic cables. This was the largest unauthorised release of contemporary classified information in history. Among the findings were claims that Arab leaders were urging the United States to attack Iran; Washington and Yemen agreed to cover up the use of U.S. warplanes to bomb Yemen; the United States is using its embassies around the world as part of a global spy network and asking diplomats to gather intelligence.

The release drew strong condemnation from the US government who claimed releasing the documents into the public domain would threaten national security interests and endanger lives. WikiLeaks was forced to change web address after coming under cyber attack and various firms - including Amazon also terminated agreements to host the site. In addition, Mastercard, Visa and PayPal refused to handle donation payments to WikiLeaks.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said it "*tore at the fabric of government*" and pledged "*aggressive steps to hold responsible those who stole this information*".

The U.S. military believes the leak can be traced to Private First Class Bradley Manning, who had trained as an intelligence analyst with the U.S. Army in Arizona and was deployed to Baghdad in 2009. Manning is quoted as saying "*Hillary Clinton and several thousand diplomats around the world are going to have a heart attack when they wake up one morning and find an entire repository of classified foreign policy is available in searchable format to the public. Everywhere there's a U.S. post, there's a diplomatic scandal that will be revealed. It's open diplomacy. World-wide anarchy in CSV format. It's Climategate with a global scope, and breathtaking depth. It's beautiful, and horrifying.*"

Bradley Manning is currently being held at a military base in Virginia and it's thought he'll face a public court martial later this year.

WikiLeaks - public enemy or global crusader?

In an interview with US TV / radio news programme, Democracy Now, Julian Assange said; "*We have clearly stated motives, but they are not antiwar motives. We are not pacifists. We are transparency activists who understand that transparent government tends to produce just government. And that is our sort of modus operandi behind our whole organisation, is to get out suppressed information into the public, where the press and the public and our nation's politics can work on it to produce better outcomes.*"

But opinion is divided. Critics of WikiLeaks claim it's reckless in the way it releases information and far from making international diplomacy and politics more accountable and transparent, its actions could paradoxically lead to greater secrecy and ultimately harm the interests of those who are concerned with just and open government.

The next release

At the time of writing former Swiss banker Rudolf Elmer had passed on data containing account details of 2,000 prominent people to Julian Assange. Mr. Assange promised full disclosure of the information once it had been vetted. Mr. Elmer is scheduled to go on trial in Switzerland for breaking bank secrecy laws. He was fired from Swiss bank Julius Baer in 2002.

Julian Assange is currently on bail and confined to the UK due to an extradition request from Sweden. He has been accused of sexual misconduct by two women in Sweden - charges he denies.