

Extended Learning: WikiLeaks-Hero or Villain?

WikiLeaks-not to be confused with Wikipedia-is a site which publishes classified and secret material leaked from governments and organizations by whistle-blowers, often in violation of the law. The site uses numerous mirrors to spread its material, and uses advanced public key encryption (see page 107) to ensure the anonymity of its sources.

WikiLeaks' early leaks focused on documenting governmental corruption, including financial and police corruption in Kenya, alleged prisoner abuses at the US Camp Delta (Guantanamo Bay) detention center, and various political leaks including then presidential nominee Sarah Palin's email account. WikiLeaks leapt into the media spotlight in April 2010 when they released a classified video from a US Apache attack helicopter. The video showed a military operation in Iraq in which two innocent Reuters' journalists were killed and two young children seriously wounded, and appeared to show an indiscriminate attack, contradicting the official Pentagon account of the incident. The release attracted more controversy when the source was revealed as a US Army Private, leading to his imprisonment.

Since then WikiLeaks has released thousands of government documents and cables, though many of them failed to have the impact of previous releases. Then, in September 2011 WikiLeaks published over 250,000 US government cables, many of which carried the governmental warning 'Strictly Protect' - meaning they named individuals such as informants, who would be in danger if identified. The move drew widespread condemnation, including from previous WikiLeaks supporters such as Reporters without Borders and several major European newspapers, and left many people wondering about the exact nature of WikiLeaks' mission.

Exercise 14-7

Research the materials WikiLeaks has released. Discuss whether it is ever justified for a web site to host or distribute documents which are secret or classified, knowing that doing so may break the law. [8 marks]

Exercise 14-8

Explain the technological developments which make it so hard for the authorities to stop or shut down sites like WikiLeaks. [4 marks]