Understanding “Wikileaks”

Jeffrey Barlow

Pacific University

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Understanding “Wikileaks”

A Review


**Jeffrey Barlow**

The events and materials popularly known as “Wikileaks” may turn out to be among the most significant events of the decade in several regards. The implications for two U.S. wars (Iraq and Afghanistan), for journalism and mass media, for the American legal system, as well as for American diplomatic relations, are all incalculable at present.

To sum up my understanding of “Wikileaks,” it began in 2010 when an anonymous source sent a trove of digital communications, “...initially half a million military dispatches from the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq” to the website Wikileaks¹. An “immense bundle” of confidential diplomatic cables was promised for later dissemination (Loc 30, Kindle edition). The materials, released in November of 2010 covered the period from 2004 through April 2009.

The materials were distributed to The New York Times, The Guardian (England) and Der Spiegel (Germany). Each of these newspapers took sometimes radically different views of the import of the materials, while using them as the basis for many stories. The materials in Open Secrets are primarily those stories with some additional chapters written for the book. The total work is 608 pages long in hard-copy publication and the articles are very uneven in their length and apparent importance.

The Wikileaks stories quickly widened to include not only journalistic analysis of the stories, but also of the organization Wikileaks, especially of its founder, Julian Asange, an Australian activist. Then it was revealed that the source of the leak was Pfc. Bradley Manning, a U.S. soldier serving as an intelligence analyst outside of Baghdad (Loc. 801, Kindle edition). Manning then became another focus of the phenomenon “Wikileaks,” particularly after he was arrested and held for court martial, now in process as of this writing (Dec. 17, 2012).

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We find it a bit odd that the character of Julian Assange or the sexual identity of Bradley Manning figure in this discussion at all, but that is, of course, characteristic of the “old journalism.” These topics seem a classic case of blaming the messenger for bad news, though there are, obviously, important issues dealing with Manning’s conduct as a member of the U.S. armed forces.

For us at the Berglund Center for Internet Studies, the critical issue is the relationship between the phenomenon of “Wikileaks” and the Internet. It is clear that the two are intimately related. Here we review what might be considered the first important work on the subject, Open Secrets, the compilation of articles published in The New York Times as a result of the materials distributed by the organization Wikileaks to The Times. In the Kindle version, which I relied upon for this review, a search of the term Internet turns up eighty results; the Internet is mentioned on more than 10% of the pages. While many of the articles reprinted question the importance of the revelations or the propriety of publishing them, nobody questions that the Internet was a key factor in the development of the entire phenomenon, and most agree that the incident is truly a watershed in the dissemination of information.

The book has considerable value, in addition to being the first substantive treatment of the phenomenon. First, the work divides the trove of digital materials into thematic sections and prefaces each of the articles reprinted with a brief summary of their content. As no one could possibly be truly expert in all of the areas covered, the summaries can guide the reader in selecting the materials of particular interest.

These summaries, however, also bear the strong imprint of the editorial slant of The New York Times; invariably what many might term “Neoliberal,” heavily weighted with rather comfortable assumptions about the place of the United States in the world, and the nature of globalism in the 21st century. The sometimes-torturous position of The Times is particularly evident in the introductory essay by Bill Keller, then the Executive Editor at The Times (For a better understanding of Mr. Keller’s career and support for the Iraqi war, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bill_Keller). Mr. Keller writes as though his prose was about to undergo close scrutiny by platoons of attorneys, probably indeed the case. He manages to criticize Mr. Assange both for being dressed too poorly and too well, among many more trenchant remarks about the entire project.
Many of the digital materials, particularly among the diplomatic messages, are reprinted verbatim which gives a strong flavor of the prose. The fact that 41 individuals, each with some claim to expertise in the area they covered, contributed one or more articles also gives the reader some trust that the analysis is accurate and substantive.

The materials are not presented as originally written, however. The news outlets concerned, as well as Wikileaks staff, redacted names of individuals such as local informants in war zones who, it was thought, might possibly be endangered. There were some strange choices made in excising such names, however. For example, the names of several Chinese diplomats who spoke disparagingly to American diplomats of the character of the North Korean leadership are revealed (See David Sanger, “North Korea Keeps the World Guessing” at Loc 2009).

One of the charges sometimes leveled against the publication of the diplomatic materials has been that to do so would decrease the willingness of foreign leaders or diplomats to speak frankly to their U.S. counterparts. The fact that the Chinese are named seems to suggest that the sources for our information on North Korean nuclear shenanigans are less critical than those for the respective wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

There are also some shortcomings to this work. Its very encyclopedic coverage makes it a chore to winnow through, although the thorough table of contents is very helpful. There is, in the Kindle format at least, no topic index, though it is easily searched in digital format.

Many of the revelations in the materials released by Wikileaks are substantial ones. It is one thing to suspect, for example, that our allies in Pakistan are treacherous double-dealers, and that our necessary ally Afghan leader Hamid Karzai is at best marginally competent, and quite another to be made aware that U. S. military and political leaders think so, too.

The Wikileaks phenomenon is potentially very important. If you want to understand the development of “Wikileaks” as Bradley Manning is court-martialed, and the impact of the events on media and journalism, Open Secrets is probably the place to begin. We will follow this review with additional ones of other significant works, and with several editorials on the topic as it continues to develop.