

## **The WikiLeaks Conspiracy**

**WIKILEAKS** is a thoroughly good idea. If you are in any doubt then have a look at Claire Ulrich's article, 'The Coming Age of Internet Censorship', published last year by WikiLeaks. It's a detailed review of the international character of Internet censorship, and a description of the different strategies employed by democratic states, dictatorships, and old-fashioned autocracies, to prevent their citizens from knowing what's going on. The presence of this kind of material on their site reveals that WikiLeaks doesn't simply make random secrets public; it also promotes discussion of issues vital to democracy.

Founded in 2006, it has remained relatively obscure. Now, with last week's publication of thousands of documents about NATO's war with the Taliban, and shenanigans within Pakistan's state apparatus, WikiLeaks has become a household name throughout the world. As a consequence the Pentagon, the government in Kabul, and many media outlets, have embarked upon a dirty tricks operation in a desperate attempt to discredit the organization.

Firstly, these agencies have alleged that WikiLeaks has put the lives of NATO's informers and supporters in Afghanistan at risk by publishing documents, which will enable the Taliban to identify and murder informants. This is a curious argument to use given the fact that NATO forces produced these documents themselves. Surely, if these forces were sufficiently diligent regarding the safety of their informers and allies they would have exercised greater caution? They would not have produced paperwork, which has the potential of putting lives at risk, in the first place.

Surely it is reasonable and necessary to presume that any documents produced, in theatre, in a war, may fall into the hands of the enemy? These issues

are as old as invasions, military occupations, and insurgencies. Spies and informers need protecting and it is the responsibility of those who employ them to ensure their safety. As far as I know WikiLeaks has done a reasonable job in attempting to obscure the identities of local informers in Afghanistan in the documents they have released. However, the prime responsibility for those exposed in this way is with the NATO forces that produced these documents. We should not allow the slipshod practices of police and military intelligence agencies in Afghanistan to be used as an excuse to suppress the truth concerning the conduct of the War.

Another, and perhaps more sinister argument, being used to smear WikiLeaks concerns the character of Julian Assange, the organization's most prominent spokesman, who is being described variously as a "cyber guerrilla" and as a "weird globetrotting mendicant cyber friar"; a homeless and obsessed individual in love with himself and consequently, blind to the dangers and pitfalls of his moralistic enterprise to free the world of its secrets. This kind of character assassination takes the subtle form of enthusiastic admiration for his idealism, while emphasising the unworldly wackiness of the man. There is also the suggestion that he is concealing WikiLeaks' real political agenda by violating all the principles of responsible journalism. This strategy of attacking WikiLeaks by trashing Julian Assange with the charge of irresponsible idealism is of a piece with the attacks on the organization for putting lives at risk.

WikiLeaks does not have an editorial policy – it leaves that to the journalists who it trusts will pick up on the documents it publishes, will analyse them, and editorialise them, in the conventional manner. However, there are evidently problems with this procedure as revealed by the publication of the video known as 'Collateral Murder'. Here, the line between WikiLeaks simply publishing the US army film of a military engagement in Iraq, and journalists calling the film "Collateral Murder", and providing You Tube

viewers with an editorial context which could not have been known by the soldiers doing the shooting, is not well drawn or clearly identified. With this procedure WikiLeaks risks straying into a form of editorialising that can only undermine its credibility.

It is indeed a shocking film taken from two US Apache helicopters as they shoot and kill a number of people below them in a small open space in Baghdad on July 12, 2007. The soldiers have every reason to believe that a number of men in a small group of eight or nine people are armed with AK47s and that one is armed with an RPG in an area which an *Agence France-Presse* reporter described on the day, as “chaotic”. The soldiers seek permission to fire on the men in the street below. They get the go-ahead from a controller and they fire with devastating effect, killing (with one exception), everybody in sight. The exception is a seriously wounded man who is seen crawling from the roadway onto the pavement.

Then, an unmarked van suddenly appears upon the scene and two men get out and start to carry the wounded survivor to the van. The soldiers seek permission to fire on the van and are promptly given permission to “engage”. This they do, quickly shooting up the van and killing everybody in sight.

The scene is truly appalling, and the callous jocularities of the battle-hardened soldiers concerning the killings is deeply disturbing. However, the film in itself proves very little. The soldiers do not fire on the wounded man – in fact you can hear them hoping that he does reach for a weapon so that they could then legitimately kill him – they never fire without receiving permission over the radio. The soldiers were not “out of control”; evidently the young men in both helicopters set out to kill “armed insurgents” in a “chaotic” area of Baghdad.

What the film does prove is that the rules of engagement were drawn too widely. Simply being armed in a chaotic area of Baghdad in the summer of 2007 was not a reason to assume that someone was an enemy of the coalition forces. Men who climb out of

their van in order to help a wounded man lying on the curb are not *prima facie* evidence of hostility – or of posing a threat – to the American forces. The soldiers in the Apaches might legitimately fear “the guy with an RPG”, but by then they already knew he was dead.

The radio transmissions from the Apache helicopters reveal the way in which war brutalises soldiers, and allows us to demand answers from the United States military authorities regarding the rules of engagement in force on the day. However, it does not, as a freestanding document, or record of events, tell us very much about the specific incident or about the Iraq War. These pictures, like most of the documents, which WikiLeaks publishes, do not speak for themselves. They need context, careful evaluation, and analysis, before any sense can be made out of them.

As a public resource providing raw materials to investigative journalists, to campaigners, and to their legal teams, WikiLeaks is an invaluable source. For as little as \$600,000 a year the organization has been able to provide an “online repository for whistle-blowers”; it has undoubtedly begun to help to undermine the way companies and governments and terrorists attempt to prevent the mass of the population from knowing exactly what is going on. It is beginning to enable cash-strapped conventional media outlets to bring many shady dealings into the light of day.

However, we need to be cautious regarding the view that all power is exercised “conspiratorially”, or that there are never any legitimate secrets. A great deal of hubris has been associated with the WikiLeaks enterprise over the last week. Democracy will not be ushered in by whistleblowers, by ‘transparency’, or by the publication of documents which company bosses, government ministers, or police and military officials wanted kept secret. Democracy needs the mobilisation of active citizens – it needs trade unions, community groups, campaigns and political parties of all kinds – prepared to challenge and resist arbitrary power whenever and wherever it appears. WikiLeaks can help with that, but that’s all it can do.