

Does WikiLeaks serve the public interest?

WIKILEAKS is an international non-profit organisation that publishes information from anonymous news sources. It has publicised thousands of confidential documents about people and events, including dispatches from the front lines in Afghanistan and Iraq and 250,000 classified U.S. diplomatic cables that included embarrassing personal remarks about world leaders, involvement in Yemen and concerns about Iran's nuclear programme.

Supporters say WikiLeaks serves the public interest and that people have a right to know about what governments and others in power are withholding. They cite transparency, freedom of information and non-censorship as their arguments. Opponents worry that the information divulged could be used by countries and groups that seek to harm the interests of the US and its close allies, including the UK, and pose a threat to security.

What do you think?



Find out more about this topic on the Web:

<http://213.251.145.96/>

www.guardian.co.uk/media/wikileaks

<http://biztech.caledonianmercury.com/2011/01/17/technofile-five-reasons-we-should-be-scared-of-the-wikileaks-effect/>

YES

from members:

James Denham
Bishopbriggs



The public should know a lot more than it is told. Sources such as WikiLeaks are the only places you can turn.

P. Jones
Bristol



It just shows what liars governments are.

James Zamboni
Wishaw



It brings an openness to the reality of what goes on in the world.

NO

from members:

Chris Cloyer
Bristol



I believe sharing knowledge is important, but certain information should be protected.

Thomas Mooney
Wishaw



It discloses security details that help terrorists attack democratic countries and nations.

James Hurley
Bristol



You don't know what the public will do with the information.

from an expert in the field:



Julian Petley is chairman of the Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom (www.cpbf.org.uk), and professor of screen media and journalism at Brunel University's School of Arts.

THE FURORE OVER WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's activities in Sweden should not be allowed to obscure the reasons why the leaking of 250,000 classified cables from U.S. embassies around the world is so vitally important. Nor should the blasé attitude of many British diplomats, politicians and, sadly, journalists throw people off the scent of what is

not simply an extraordinarily important story, but the raw material for hundreds, maybe thousands, of revelations.

The cables reveal an enormous number of facts of global public interest: King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia repeatedly urged the US to bomb Iran; elements of the Pakistani security services are hand in glove with Taliban groups; Prince Andrew visited Kyrgyzstan at the taxpayers' expense and publicly attacked the Serious Fraud Office's attempt to investigate corruption allegations involving the global security and defence company BAE Systems and the Saudi royal family, to cite just a few examples.

In response to the argument that the cables' release has endangered lives, the US government was told before publication about the areas to be covered and invited to respond. Certain "redactions" were made as a consequence. None of the material that was posted was classified as top secret—3 million US government employees were cleared to see it—and it was available on the US Department of Defense's internal Secret Protocol Router Network.

What makes all this material so crucially important is that it exposes, in journalist and author Simon Jenkins' words, "the corruption and mendacity of those in power, and the mismatch between what they claim and what they do." People in democracies have an absolute entitlement to know what is being done in their name by their government and by that government's supposed allies. This is particularly so when their country is engaged in various forms of warfare in which its citizens' lives are at risk—either directly on the battlefield or indirectly on the home front as a result of terrorist acts of revenge.

And when the war in question is a matter of considerable public controversy—as in Iraq and Afghanistan—then the case for maximum openness becomes incontestable. It is in this respect I would argue that WikiLeaks has done an incalculable service to democracy. ☞

from an expert in the field:



Jamie Bartlett is head of the violence and extremism programme at Demos, an independent think-tank and research institute (www.demos.co.uk).

THOSE OF US FORTUNATE enough to live in liberal democracies know we are sometimes deceived by the people we elect to represent. We also know that transparency in government is a good thing, because it allows us to hold them to account and to expose wrongdoing.

But it does not follow that everything the government does should be public knowledge. Transparency must be qualified, balanced against the risk that making certain information public might cause harm to individuals or society. It is our elected governments and the independent bodies overseeing them that must make these sorts of difficult decisions.

WikiLeaks' utopian vision of absolute transparency in government affairs is easily dismissed. Even Julian Assange agrees that public interest is served by keeping some things out of the public eye, such as the location of low-security Russian nuclear material or the names and addresses of people under witness protection. Dozens of terrorist plots in the UK since 2005 have been thwarted because of undercover intelligence. Revealing too much information about counterterrorism work would compromise efforts to keep us safe.

Some degree of secrecy is also true in the grubby world of international affairs. Almost every example of successful diplomacy, where dangerous situations have been resolved peacefully, involved some degree of secrecy. Former Prime Minister John Major's decision to open a channel with the provisional Irish Republican Army is credited with helping end "the Troubles." Both the British public and the Unionists would have stopped it dead had it been public knowledge. Secrecy in negotiations over sensitive topics means that negotiators can speak frankly and honestly, which is essential.

Though imperfect, our governments are accountable to the people they serve, and there are checks and balances such as freedom of information and public inquiries to ensure their answerability. WikiLeaks, however, is not accountable full-stop. The only thing that stops it from publishing certain things, such as nuclear secrets, is self-imposed restraint. And that is the problem: We cannot be sure it will always exercise restraint.

Transparency is unquestionably good. But it is in no one's interest that decisions about its limits rest in the hands of an unaccountable group of people hiding behind computer screens. ☞

What do you think?
Does WikiLeaks serve the public interest?

YES NO

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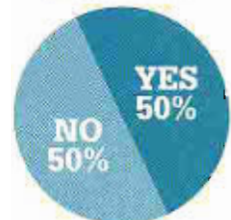
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