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Ian Rosewall
Deakin University

Matthew J. Warren
Deakin University

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Wikileaks: The Truth or Not

I. Rosewall and M. J. Warren
School of Information Systems
Deakin University
Melbourne, Australia
Ian.rosewall@deakin.edu.au
Matthew.warren@deakin.edu.au

Abstract

We live in the Information Age, an age where information is shared in a global context and in real time. The issue is whether all information should be disclosed. In the 'Information Age' do secrets still exist? Another major issue is whether groups of vigilantes are the ones who should be disclosing this information, should these vigilante groups be trusted? This paper will focus upon the impact of Wikileaks and the problem of Information disclosure especially when that information is confidential. It will identify cases for discussion. In the main these cases will be of a military flavour.

Keywords

Security, Information disclosure, Information Society, wikileaks and whistleblowers.

INTRODUCTION

This paper will discuss Wikileaks. (<http://www.wikileaks.org>) Wikileaks describes itself as an 'open government group', 'anti corruption group' or a whistle blower's site' (Aftergood, 2010). Grand ideals to be sure but does wikileaks live up to its claims, indeed *should* it live up to its claims. 'Open government' is a political belief that suggests that the business of government and any state administration should be opened to 'effective public scrutiny and oversight'. Anti corruption groups are for those who wish to address corruption challenges at their workplace, and finally whistleblowers are for those who hold deep concerns that their organisations hold illegal or unethical practices within that workplace.

The popularity of Wikileaks has been obvious "*Wikileaks is an uncensorable version of Wikipedia for untraceable mass document leaking and analysis.*" This may on first sight seem desirable but, when it is deemed as being 'uncensorable' do we take it that there can be only one view of these 'facts'? unlike its namesake Wikipedia which would allow for a balanced view perhaps this is not the site that it first portrays.

Wikileaks seems to be able to demand debate whenever the name is brought up in conversation. It has the ability to polarise the people who read it. On the one side are the people who believe that Julian Assange *et al* are the saviours of modern journalism whilst others believe that 'whistleblowing' is not always the answer and that some things are better left unsaid.

This paper is delivered with a view of increasing the possibility of Stimulating debate in this area. This paper hopes to explore what we perceive as being 'truth' (a word in itself which would open long debates) it is designed to encourage, a method widely used in Europe of, 'Socratic Dialogue' which encourages in-depth understanding of various issues that are articulated within these writings.

DISCUSSION

Some key issues that need to be discussed within this paper include, but not limited to:

- Is Information Private?
- Do we have an issue with the Web2 Generation Y?
- Are people discerning with the information they divulge/receive?
- Does the format alter the content?
- All of the facts??

Is Information Private?

As a working definition of the privacy of information we should expect that an individual can reasonably assume that no recording is taking place, and information which has been provided for specific purposes from one individual to another can reasonably expect will not be made public especially if that information is not in the public interest as in the case below.

Some authors recognise that there is a problem in this area particularly with government who are all too quick to censor information. The Federation of American Scientists (FAS) in the form of Steven Aftergood (2010) have suggested “*From one perspective, WikiLeaks is a creative response to a real problem afflicting the U.S. and many other countries, namely the over-control of government information to the detriment of public policy*” but he tempers this argument with “*WikiLeaks says that it is dedicated to fighting censorship, so a casual observer might assume that it is more or less a conventional liberal enterprise committed to enlightened democratic policies. But on closer inspection that is not quite the case. In fact, WikiLeaks must be counted among the enemies of open society because it does not respect the rule of law nor does it honor the rights of individuals. Last year, for example, WikiLeaks published the “secret ritual” of a college women’s sorority called Alpha Sigma Tau. Now Alpha Sigma Tau (like several other sororities “exposed” by WikiLeaks) is not known to have engaged in any form of misconduct, and WikiLeaks does not allege that it has. Rather, WikiLeaks chose to publish the group’s confidential ritual just because it could. This is not whistleblowing and it is not journalism. It is a kind of information vandalism*”. What then is deemed as newsworthy and should be published and, what is Information vandalism and, who is going to make that decision or distinction.

Do we have an issue with the Generation Y?

There are over 4 million Australians in generation Y, the RSA surveyed more than **1,000 Generation Y adults** about online security issues and found that “*young adults regularly engage in risky behaviours that compromise their privacy and reputation.*” The concern here is that if Gen Y employees struggle to keep personal information private, can they be trusted with sensitive business data? This generation has long been accused of not having respect for security without reason. If they do not see the point of the security measure they are quite likely to ignore it. For example this generation probably sees no issue with ‘outing’ a sorority. On first sight this might seem to be a valid point but the issue prevails, who makes this judgment and where does it stop, a good example maybe wikileaks themselves. They portray themselves as a site that tells all except where *they* get this information. So one rule for us?

The right to know can sometimes be taken too literally. The sharing of music and films, *pirating*, has long been an issue in modern times. WikiLeaks has engaged in this behaviour. Last year it published the full text of a book about corruption in Kenya called “It’s Our Turn to Eat” by the reporter Michela Wrong without permission. This would, have course, of had a massive impact on sales. Is this just another example of feeding Generation Y with what it wants regardless of the consequences?

Are people discerning with the information they divulge/receive?

Much has been written about the *rights* of the people *to all and any information*, and in the majority of cases this is seen as laudable however, once we enter into global trade is this the right attitude? Would a worker within Microsoft making the next great windows application be justified in publishing? Does this make a more fair market? is the market fair? Microsoft can afford to do R&D to a greater extent because of its market position, if this was removed due to shared information, would it be a sound business activity?

If the aim of the whistleblower is to prevent harm to others then this could be deemed a plausible excuse. Bowie (1994) presents the argument that the whistleblower should have ‘*evidence that would persuade a reasonable person*’ but perhaps, *all* evidence including the issues leading up to the event. Whistleblowing stems from the moral motive of preventing unnecessary harm to others. In order to do that it must first provide all information pertaining to that whistleblowing action.

The major issue is should one person or a group of five people within Wikileaks have that power to disclose any information. On what ethical or moral ground does Wikileaks have the right to do this, have the right to interpret this information or the right to tell the world? You could have a situation where misinformation is being reported by Wikileaks as actually being fact, you then have a major issue, because it has then started to change peoples’ perception based on untrue information and is the weakness of Wikileaks. *Just because something is posted on Wikileaks, how do we know it’s true, how do we know it’s not disinformation?* (Warren, 2010).

Some issue has been voiced by a number of military correspondents suggesting the horrific attack helicopter video shown on the site is a culmination of weeks of ground action. Although the commentary on the video would be repugnant to most civilised people the whole story has not been told. This might not excuse the actions but could give us a deeper understanding on what happened that day. If ‘Google Earth’ continues down the path of making their images ‘real time’ are they merely creating a wealth of very useful images available to Burglars and Robbers, worse still, to Terrorists or are they just showing what’s there and taking away the responsibility of ownership of that information? Are there implications here that follow on from the ignorance of consequences?

Does the format alter the content?

On the 30th October 1938:

“Thousands of people, believing they were under attack by Martians, flooded newspaper offices and radio and police stations with calls, asking how to flee their city or how they should protect themselves from "gas raids." Scores of adults reportedly required medical treatment for shock and hysteria. The hoax worked, historians say, because the broadcast authentically simulated how radio worked in an emergency. "Audiences heard their regularly scheduled broadcast interrupted by breaking news," said Michele Hilmes, a communications professor at University of Wisconsin in Madison and author of *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952*. Stations then cut to a live reporter on the scene of the invasion in New Jersey. "By the end of the first half of the program, the radio studios themselves were under attack," Hilmes said..." (Lovgen 2005).

First of all this was NOT a hoax because, it had been advertised before and during the broadcast that, it was a *dramatisation* of a H.G Wells book. So why were there cases of mass hysteria? Are we now seeing the like again? Is Julian Assange and his website, wikileaks, just another, updated Orson Wells on steroids? It has recently been described as:

"...Created by an online network of dissidents, journalists, academics, technology experts and mathematicians from various countries, the website also uses technology that makes the original sources of the leaks untraceable. Depending on who you talk to, it's either a brilliant new form of journalism or a dangerously loose cannon where all leaks are good leaks?" (ABC, 2010).

The popularity of Wikileaks has been obvious *"Wikileaks is an uncensorable version of Wikipedia for untraceable mass document leaking and analysis."* This may on first sight seem desirable but, when it is deemed as being 'uncensorable' do we take it that there can be only one view of these 'facts'? unlike its namesake Wikipedia, which would allow for a balanced view, perhaps this is not the site that it first portrays.

All of the facts??

Why did it appear necessary to issue all of the files? Was this for effect or for completeness? Some authors, including some formal supporters of Wikileaks are starting to question the methods and content of this site. Stephen Aftergood (2010) says *"I think WikiLeaks is wrong to publish private records of groups (college sororities!) and individuals who are completely innocent of wrongdoing. Even those commenters who don't value their own privacy should be able to understand that it is disrespectful to intrude on the personal privacy of others. Politically it also infringes on individual freedom of association, and in that way it violates the norms of an open society. If that is what WikiLeaks stands for, then I stand opposed."* When we consider if all the facts have been included, we should also ask ourselves if we should be privy to this information in the first place. Aftergood goes on to say *"I wish WikiLeaks would reconsider and withdraw all of those private records it has published that have no public policy significance. But I don't really expect WikiLeaks to do so — its goals seem to lie in another direction — and I will continue to criticize it for that."* Aftergood is not alone in his beliefs. We are asked to consider before whistleblowing, how substantial and irreversible are the effects of these practices? Are there any compensating public benefits that justify these practices and in wikileaks 'expose' of sororities this has to be brought into question.

The most worrying impact of including all the facts comes when we hear that after WikiLeaks published intelligence documents which would appear to list the names and villages of Afghans who have been cooperating with the American military. News reports tell us that *"it didn't take long for the Taliban to react"*. A spokesman for the group quickly threatened to "punish" any Afghan listed as having "collaborated" with the U.S. and the Kabul authorities.

CONCLUSION

In the interest of debate we have looked at whether there is reality in the perspective that Information is Private or indeed, whether it should be private. Can we honestly say that the whistleblower in this case wikileaks, has 'evidence that would persuade a reasonable person'. I think we have the evidence, but do we have the background knowledge and perspective of that information to make an informed decision as to whether it should remain private.

Is there an issue with the Web2 Generation Y or is this thirst for knowledge, all knowledge, just a natural progression. A survival of the fittest? Certainly many authors believe that Generation Y are responsible for many of these issues. This generation has long been accused of not having respect for security without reason, the problem lies in who decides what is reasonable. We all have rights and some believe *to all and any information*, and in the majority of cases this is seen as laudable. The major issue is should one person or a group of five people within Wikileaks have that power to disclose any information. On what ethical or moral ground does Wikileaks have the right to do this, have the right to interpret this information or the right to tell the

world? You could have a situation where misinformation is being reported by Wikileaks as actually being fact, you then have a major issue, because it has then started to change people's perception based on untrue information and is the weakness of Wikileaks. *Just because something is posted on Wikileaks, how do we know it's true, how do we know it's not disinformation?* (Warren, 2010).

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Can they defend the situation where it would appear to list the names and villages of Afghans who have been cooperating with the American military, assuming of course that this is the case. And if so, who will question them. Perspective, in all of the cases mentioned above lies in the lead up to the attack of the helicopter or the innocents on the ground. The next stage of the research will be to look at Wikileaks cases and determine whether the cases are actually true or not.

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