

Diplomacy, transparency and public opinion

Rory Medcalf

Politica Exterior (Madrid)

May/June 2011

Pp. 114-121

For people who value freedom and truth, what is not to applaud about WikiLeaks? Certainly in Australia, the home country of Julian Assange, the release of large numbers of leaked American cables has unlocked a tide of libertarian righteousness.

Throughout the Australian media and much of civil society, there has been a thrill of surprise at the unsaintly ways and words of diplomacy, a frisson of satisfaction at seeing the powerful humbled and exposed, and a current of outrage at the possibility that Assange might in some way be punished. All this has become muddled with some less noble impulses, including the voyeuristic buzz of reading other people's mail, and a prominent minority vein of anti-Americanism that runs through Australian public opinion.

But beyond the melodrama and moralising, what matters are the consequences. Of course it would be grand if the result of WikiLeaks was some kind of global catharsis leading to universal transparency, peace and justice. Yet what if the effects tend in the opposite direction? Any comprehensive analysis of 'cablegate' will need to consider whether the unauthorized publication of vast numbers of classified US diplomatic cables will end up doing more harm than good.

I have worked as a diplomat and intelligence analyst for the Australian government. Yet my original profession was as a journalist, in Australia's proudly anti-authoritarian newspaper culture, and today I work again in the public domain, as a think-tank analyst and foreign policy commentator. So I have an unusual double perspective that allows me to appreciate both sides of the WikiLeaks debate.

Naturally there is a good side to any net increase in the openness and honesty of communication and politics. Policy-making and diplomacy should be more transparent than it has become. Corruption deserves to be exposed, and society as a whole can benefit if that exposure results in political reform. As a young journalist, I learned that news is something that somebody somewhere does not want the public to know; everything else is propaganda and public relations. And for traditional newspapers, the short-term benefits of WikiLeaks are tremendous: a massive trove of hard-hitting news stories. For instance one major Indian broadsheet, The Hindu, had by April 2011 produced 21 front-page stories based on wikileaks revelations.

Yet the supporters, enablers and advocates of WikiLeaks also have a responsibility to consider whether the following potential consequences might balance or even outweigh the virtues of such unprecedented geopolitical disclosure. They should ask themselves these questions.

Is WikiLeaks bad for diplomacy and international cooperation? More than ever, most of the world's problems demand cooperative responses. And until human nature changes or nations wither, this will need a combination of private frankness and public tact between governments. Sometimes secrecy is a condition for trust and honesty, not its enemy. It would be nice to imagine cablegate as the dawn of a new diplomacy which has no place for discretion or deception. It is more realistic to conclude that the old games of statecraft will resume in new ways, with the chessboard temporarily shaken up.

Is WikiLeaks bad for the United States and its allies, and does this serve democracy or hinder it? The leak of thousands of US cables might do more harm to Washington and its allies than to authoritarian-leaning powers China and Russia. It will neither precipitate some miracle of complete openness by Western governments nor encourage China or Russia to move a millimetre in that direction. But it will weaken the US and its allies in their ability to coordinate with and trust one another while trying to manage the risks arising from a changing global balance of power. For instance, the leaking of a cable spelling out sensitive US-NATO nuclear discussions is really defensible only if equivalent Chinese and Russian secret memos are going online any time soon. The cables amount to an intelligence gift to America's rivals. And even if WikiLeaks and its news partners continue to edit and 'redact' the cables they release, it is possible of course that Beijing, Moscow or other governments have by now electronically penetrated the security of WikiLeaks or relevant news organizations, and thus gained access to those cables that remain unpublished.

Is WikiLeaks bad for freedom of information? Western governments are tightening their information security systems as a consequence of WikiLeaks. Officials will find it harder to access their own government's classified documents. Indeed, the more sensitive workings of policy and diplomacy in Western countries may regress to become the preserve of a small number of individuals, with increased reliance on personal channels like emails and phone conversations and less information recorded in formal documents. After the intelligence failures of 9/11, there was a push towards information-sharing between agencies and allies; this will now face fresh scrutiny and a probable rollback. That said, there was obviously a problem that needed fixing: a system in which a 23-year-old soldier can download a hoard of sensitive cables was a disaster waiting to happen.

Is WikiLeaks bad for diplomats and good for spies? In a complex and globalised world, flexible, well-resourced and relatively transparent diplomatic services are needed more than ever. Yet if one consequence of WikiLeaks is that fewer people trust or speak to diplomats, then foreign ministries could become even less effective and adaptive. One entity that stands to benefit at their expense is clandestine intelligence agencies. Since 9/11, Western foreign services have lost resources and influence relative to their secret cousins. If diplomatic information channels fail, governments will place even more emphasis on covert intelligence-gathering, which is less leak-prone but worse value for money (and often less useful) than normal diplomatic reporting. A new world of large-scale diplomatic leaks will also mean extra duties for counter-intelligence organisations, like the FBI. This will help boost their budgets, but will also be a damaging diversion of their capabilities, since they already have plenty of threats to manage in an age of terrorism and great-power tensions.

Is WikiLeaks bad for peacemakers? Vicious conflicts are rarely resolved purely through open negotiation. Civil and communal wars, in particular, end only when leaders are willing to break with the violent extremists on their own side by holding talks with their enemies – and such talk must begin in secret if the leaders want to survive to round two. The successful Northern Ireland peace process of the 1990s, for example, would never have stood a chance in a cablegate world. Other conflicts and disputes, such as Kashmir, are never likely to end without secret, back-channel diplomacy in the critical early stages of peacemaking.

Is WikiLeaks bad for journalism? For some mainstream media organisations, cablegate seems better than a goldmine: every day a new nugget, with no digging needed. Yet by being so closely co-opted in treating indiscriminate leaks as headline news, day after day, parts of the old media risk hastening their own marginalisation and further dulling their already-diminished investigative faculties. Moreover, such organisations are wading into new ethical and legal grey areas, which may yet ensnare them. For a start, how do the laws of defamation apply to material from leaked diplomatic cables? It is also at the very least a double-standard not to remove the names of individual diplomats and their contacts from news stories based on leaked cables, when journalists themselves assert a right to protect off-record sources.

Is WikiLeaks bad for the Obama Administration and other centre-left governments? Whatever criticisms might be leveled at him, President Obama leads the most internationalist US Administration that many WikiLeaks supporters are likely to see in decades. WikiLeaks is fanning patriotic anger in America, and this will translate into political capital for the Republican right. In Australia, a local equivalent of this situation is developing. The centre-left government of Prime Minister Julia Gillard is fragile, and cablegate revelations are carving damaging political rifts between the foreign minister and prime minister, Labor's left and right wings, and the Labor party and its Green and independent partners.

Of course, Julian Assange and the supporters of WikiLeaks insist that their agenda is the promotion of 'truth', as if truth always and automatically has wholesome consequences for human welfare. But international politics is a messy and treacherous place, where a combination of good intentions and honest mistakes can have terrible and unintended consequences.

In such circumstances, honourable foreign policy decisions should be informed by what the great thinker Max Weber called an ethic of responsibility. A deed's worth should be measured, not by its declared or even actual intentions, but by an unvarnished appraisal of its impact. Such a commendable, real-world principle informs the unglamorous daily labours of many of the world's best officials and diplomats, America's included. Sometimes in the crooked reality of world politics, right

brings about wrong, whereas seemingly amoral methods achieve good, or at least a minimisation of harm.

For all that, I have moderated my early opposition to the cablegate leaks. Of course, the extraordinary developments of early 2011 in the Middle East and North Africa have been inspiring for anyone who believes in everyone's right to a democratic way of life. And, although WikiLeaks was hardly the principal cause of these upheavals, its revelations about American official awareness of corruption and misgovernance obviously fanned the flames of public anger. Having said that, if Assange and his WikiLeaks and media collaborators wish to take some credit for the liberating qualities of the Arab spring, it would be interesting to know how inevitable and necessary they consider the suffering of the victims of the protracted violence in Libya.

Elsewhere, notably in India, the exposure of the flaws of a patronage-plagued polity appears to have done a service to the workings of democracy. Revelations of American diplomats' acute awareness of corruption in India have embarrassed not only the Indian political class but also the Indian media, which has often failed to report the extent of such wrongdoing in high places. It remains to be seen, however, whether such revelations will be a catalyst for reform or for political paralysis.

Turning to Australia, the WikiLeaks phenomenon – and the largely positive public reaction – has shown that many Australians are both distrustful and poorly informed about the way government operates, especially in foreign and security policy. I have been surprised that most people automatically assume that government secrecy is primarily about avoiding public scrutiny rather than about thwarting external espionage and threats. This gulf of ignorance and mistrust has widened in the past decade. Government must bear a large measure of blame for this creeping alienation.

Certainly, the advent of WikiLeaks could and should be a democratic opportunity to bridge that gulf. But this places an onus on the media to provide context and exercise intelligent judgment in the way that they report stories based on WikiLeaks. For instance, simply because a politician or official speaks privately with foreign diplomats, that does not mean they he or she is a 'spy'. Such sensationalist reporting – which we have seen extensively in the Australian press - is likely to push governments and officials deeper into their bunkers of silence and secrecy.

What should be done? Diplomatic and security establishments in democracies like Australia should review their information policies. One reason is to ensure that no more massive information leaks can occur. But a second reason is to prepare options for political leaders to increasing the transparency of diplomatic and security information.

Clearly there is a need for our diplomats to do more to explain their work to the public and the world. Parliamentarians can and should do more to interrogate the thrust of foreign policy. Diplomatic communications should be written against the possibility of their future release under Freedom-of-Information laws. And journalists and other citizens should pursue, assiduously, formal freedom-of-information requests on foreign policy issues that concern them. If the laws do not satisfy them, then they should lobby parliamentarians for further law reform. Some sensitive cables and other official communications should be kept secret for many years, but I can speak from experience when I say that much diplomatic reporting is over-classified. There will always be a need for some secret diplomacy. But reform is necessary. Diplomacy must engage with an information-saturated world and its anarchist discontents.

The solution, however, is not the indiscriminate leaking of and dumping of the earnest superpower's confidential conversations and communications. No doubt there have been some dramatic and positive consequences of WikiLeaks. But has the good outweighed the bad? As with so many revolutions, it remains too early to tell.

Rory Medcalf is program director for international security at the Lowy Institute for International Policy, in Sydney, Australia. He is a former diplomat, journalist and intelligence analyst. This article is based on a series of posts from the Lowy Institute's blog, The Interpreter, www.lowyinterpreter.org

