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## When Google Met WikiLeaks

### 1. Background

On June 23rd, 2011, Julian Assange, editor in chief and founder of WikiLeaks, was interviewed by Eric Schmidt, executive chairman of Google, and Jared Cohen, director of Google Ideas, for their upcoming book, *The New Digital Age*. When the book was released, it was praised as “a visionary forecast of global technological change”. However, to Assange, the book was “a simplistic fusion of Fukuyama ‘end of history’ ideology—out of vogue since the 1990s—and faster mobile phones” (Assange, 49). He asserts that the book is a love letter to the US government and is Google’s attempt to position itself as a geopolitical superpower. Many of the ideas and views brought up by Assange during his interview were either ignored or misconstrued in the publication of the book. In response, Assange published his own book, *When Google Met WikiLeaks*. *When Google Met WikiLeaks* includes Assange’s review of Google’s book and background information on WikiLeaks’ legal battles with various governments. The bulk of Assange’s book consists of the interview transcript between Assange and Schmidt in which they discuss the control and censorship of information.

### 2. Philosophy of Wikileaks

Assange’s philosophy is that all information should be made easily accessible without any censorship. Assange references what he calls humanity’s “intellectual record”, which exists

as a collection of humanity's past as a civilization. Humanity relies on this historical record as reference for the future and to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. According to Assange, it would benefit all of humanity to "be as large as possible... and then make the record as searchable as possible" in order for humanity to "be as advanced as possible" (Assange, 124-134). However, there are people who are "trying to destroy bits of that record, and others that are trying to prevent people from putting things into that record in the first place" (Assange, 124). These people are often government officials and other people in high positions that stand to lose if the public were aware of their actions. This leads to what Assange refers to as the censorship pyramid, or the different levels of censorship. At the top level is the murder of journalists and informants, in which those in power kill off potential whistleblowers to prevent the leak of information. On the next level are threats of legal action against journalists in order to silence them. On the level below that is self-censorship in which individuals and corporations are afraid of becoming part of the other levels, so they choose to censor themselves to avoid becoming a target. Assange established WikiLeaks to protect individuals from these forms of censorship and preserve the completeness of the intellectual record. They work with journalists, whistleblowers, and informants to publish their information under the safety of anonymity.

Another core component of Assange's goals is a self-described justice motive. When asked why he founded Wikileaks, he answered that "I thought there were too many unjust acts. And I wanted there to be more just acts, and fewer unjust acts" (Assange, 65). To achieve more just acts would require changing how people behaved, which Assange believed could be achieved through information. Information spreads quickly, and determines how we behave. A small amount of information can change the behavior of many people. According to Assange, revealing information that is true and information that those doing unjust acts try to censor

produces behavior which is morally good and disincentivizes behavior that isn't. As he puts bluntly, "We don't care as long as it's true... let people fight with the truth, and when the bodies are cleared there will be bullets of truth everywhere, that's fine" (Assange, 177).

### 3. Utilitarianism

Looking at WikiLeaks and Assange's actions through the lens of utilitarianism, it is difficult to say whether or not the spread of information is morally good. Utilitarianism considers actions that maximize happiness and reduce harm to hold moral worth. If one were to believe Assange, then sites like WikiLeaks lead to almost entirely positive outcomes. It allows people to make more informed decisions and reveals the shady dealing of various organizations. According to Assange, "the release of leaked information can only harm organizations that are engaged in acts which the public does not support"(Assange, 194). Therefore, if an organization were to do an action that would lead to net harm to the public, then releasing knowledge of this action would ideally prevent this action or help others work to prevent this action. Meanwhile, if an organization were to do an action that would lead to net happiness for the public, they would only receive additional support from the public due to the leaked information. In addition, WikiLeaks engages in "harm-minimization procedures" in order "to minimize [harm] to people who might be named in the material" and "minimize the risk that opportunists will reduce the impact of the material when it is released" (Assange, 166).

However, if one were to trust Google and the US government, then Assange's actions constitute espionage and put lives at risk. They compare WikiLeaks to cyber terrorist groups such as Anonymous. Google predicts that the existence of WikiLeaks will inspire an insurgence of "hackers who engage in activities like stealing and publishing personal and classified information online"(Schmidt, 163). Google insinuates that these hackers might be willing to

cause harm or threaten innocents in the pursuit of spreading information. Therefore, the decision of whether WikiLeaks is morally good depends on if one believes that the harm caused by the leaked information is minimal, like Assange, or if they believe that the leaked information will lead to harm to a majority of people, like Google.

From the framework point of view, this can be seen as a dispute in *anticipated consequences*. Utilitarianism and consequentialism have their hands tied in this case. As Graham reasons, “there is certainly a metaphysical difficulty about the idea of the consequences of an action, but it is one which need not trouble ethical consequentialism, so long as *in practice* the morally relevant consequences of an action are agreed upon—which they usually are.” (Graham, 106). Unfortunately, in this case the morally relevant consequences are definitely not agreed upon, and we have trouble getting any further using utilitarianism/consequentialism.

#### 4. Contractualism

On the basis of contractualism, Assange’s actions would be seen as morally justified. In “The Second Treatise of Government”, it is established that a person’s natural state is “all free, equal and independent” (Locke, 95). When a person consents to be part of a social structure, they are forfeiting these rights to the state in exchange for protection and efficiency. Wikileaks reveal many cases where governments not only fail to uphold their role of acting for the benefit of their citizens, but also attempt to cover up their actions. In these cases, the citizens are unaware of the government’s actions, raising the issue that “we can only assert that someone has consented to something, if they have had the chance to dissent” (Graham, 17). There’s no way to dissent from being surveilled, for instance, if one isn’t even aware of it and no choice was ever presented. Tacit consent fails to justify the government.

Assange's justification for releasing information is similar to Rawls' "Hypothetical" Consent. If a government was "engaged in acts that the public supports", they would often benefit from the release of information; meanwhile, a government that "engaged in acts that the public does not support" would be negatively affected by the public backlash (Assange, 134). A rational individual or government behind a "veil of ignorance" would then choose to release the information since it would benefit the most people.

## 5. Kantianism

All parties involved, the governments, Google, and WikiLeaks, would be viewed as morally bad from the perspective of Kantianism. The governments that WikiLeaks exposes violate human rights while hiding the evidence, which would break Kant's principle of acting with "respects for persons" (Graham, 88). Hiding evidence fails the universalizability test, since if everyone were to hide information from each other, then it would lead to no one willing to cooperate and everyone distrusting each other.

Google would not be seen as morally good as well. In their book, *The New Digital Age*, they make several attacks on Assange's character by claiming that Assange causes harm without giving examples and incorrectly referencing Assange's statements. During the interview, Assange states that he redacts information to "minimize risk to people who might be named in the material" and "minimize the risk that opportunists will reduce the impact of the material when it is released". However, Google changes this statement to instead claim that "[Assange] redacted only to reduce the international pressure that was financially strangling him" (Assange, 198). They use this claim to position Assange as only interested in money and suggest the establishment of "a central body facilitating the release of information" (Schmidt, 42).

Mischaracterizing Assange and using him as a means to create an organization to oversee the control of information is entirely against the values of Kantianism.

WikiLeaks also fails to adhere to Kantianism. Assange argues that his purpose for running WikiLeaks is for there to “be more just acts, and fewer unjust acts” and his reasoning is that he believes that is the morally correct thing to do, which would align with Kantianism’s values (Assange, 65). The issue is that his primary sources of information are whistleblowers, who are technically stealing the information from the companies and governments they are exposing. Google also argues that the existence of WikiLeaks encourages cyber terrorism and the theft of private documents. These are actions that Kantianism wouldn’t approve of and by extension, WikiLeaks as well due to its reliance on these sources of information.

## 6. Egoism

Analyzing from the framework of rational egoism, Wikileaks seems to lack strong support. Google and the govts. can be positioned both ways, to some extent. Rational egoism states that one ought to perform actions that maximize self-interest. At first glance, Wikileak’s actions come from a moralist side rather than egoist - spreading information comes with extensive risks, as mentioned above with the pyramid of censorship. The whistleblowers and Wikileaks spread information for the moral goal of justice for others, at the *cost* of their own self interest.

An interesting point is that Google’s book portrays Wikileaks in a more egoist manner, such as claiming “Assange told us he redacted only to reduce the international pressure that was financially strangling him” (Schmidt, 47). Assange denies this claim as misrepresentation. Egoism is certainly not an ethical framework that is publicly approved.

Google is also non-egoists in a similar way, if one views them as acting for public good rather than self interest. Assange seems to believe this, concluding that “Google’s bosses genuinely believe in the civilizing power of enlightened multinational corporations... continuous with the shaping of the world according to the better judgement of the ‘benevolent superpower’” (Assange, 35). The benevolent superpower in this case refers to the U.S government - and the word benevolent seems to run counter to egoism.

Of course, others may view the actions of Google and governments as entirely in self-interest. Google may ally with the government to gain more power and contracts, while governments survey and censor to preserve their own power over the people without a true desire for public good.

## 7. Conclusion

It’s clear that Wikileaks has been highly impactful, and that Assange’s beliefs in information’s disproportionate effectiveness have held true. As for the ethical side of things, it’s not quite so clear. Google and govs argue that yes, while impactful, the impact has not been for good. Wikileaks supporters argue for the other way. Our analysis from the perspective of various frameworks have given various results, from utilitarianism’s inconclusiveness to Kantianism’s condemnation for all involved.

What is most interesting has been the general appeal towards contractualism and utilitarianism in the involved sides’ own arguments. The current general consensus favors these frameworks, and so they are appealed to. Utilitarianism seems to often fall short due to the dispute over consequences, but is used nonetheless to defend from attacks with contractualism. The government might defend its breach of contractualism with claims of overall public good,

but that cannot even be agreed upon. The matter of Wikileaks is not resolved so easily, but can reveal the tendencies of modern ethical disputes.



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