



Friend or Foe?: WikiLeaks and the *Guardian* Epilogue

On Sunday, November 28 at 6:13 p.m. GMT, the *Guardian* website went live with the diplomatic cables.¹ Besides its stories, the *Guardian* provided readers with a searchable database of redacted cables, video, blogs, photographs, links, graphics, timelines and more. The *New York Times*, *Der Spiegel*, *Le Monde* and *El País* released their stories simultaneously on their websites. Ironically, the original 9:30 p.m. GMT embargo was broken inadvertently by *Der Spiegel* when copies of the magazine mistakenly were delivered to a small town on the Swiss-German border, where a radio editor bought one and broadcast the headlines. A Twitter user picked it up, and the embargo went down the drain.

The November 29 *Guardian* paper edition displayed cables stories across the front page. Investigations Editor David Leigh wrote the round-up piece, which headlined the US order to spy on diplomats, as well as the Saudi king's request that the US bomb Iran. In an explanatory note to readers about the origins of the leaked documents, Leigh wrote that "what will emerge in the days and weeks ahead is an unprecedented picture of secret diplomacy as conducted by the planet's sole superpower. There are 251,287 dispatches in all, from more than 250 US embassies and consulates."² He also gave readers a hint of the story behind the story of the WikiLeaks cables:

Freedom of information campaigner Heather Brooke obtained a copy of the database through her own contacts and joined the *Guardian* team. The paper is to publish independently, but simultaneously with the *New York Times* and *Der Spiegel*, along with *Le Monde* in Paris and *El País* in Madrid. As on previous occasions the *Guardian* is redacting information likely to cause reprisals against vulnerable individuals.

Although by January 2011 the US State Department had concluded, at least for public consumption, that the WikiLeaks documents had caused little lasting damage, the stories were a

¹ For the breaking story, see: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/nov/28/us-embassy-cable-leak-diplomacy-crisis>

² David Leigh, "How 250,000 US embassy cables were leaked," *The Guardian*, November 28, 2010. See: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/nov/28/how-us-embassy-cables-leaked>

bombshell in November.³ The US State Department took no legal action against the newspapers, but released a statement, which said in part:

These cables could compromise private discussions with foreign governments and opposition leaders, and when the substance of private conversations is printed on the front pages of newspapers around the world, it can deeply impact not only on US foreign policy interests but those of our allies and friends around the world.

For three weeks, the *Guardian* published WikiLeaks stories daily (the *New York Times* chose to stop after eight days, while *El País* continued into the new year). But in mid-December, the newspaper got a scare. A pro-Hezbollah Lebanese newspaper claimed it too had all the cables and would publish them. As Editor Alan Rusbridger recalls:

For me, that was always the great fear: that while we were doing this publication, that they were going to leak, and that we would be blamed. Because people would start dying, and the State Department would then turn around and say, 'There you are. We told you so.'⁴

Both *Le Monde* and the *Guardian* sent representatives to talk to the Lebanese paper and urge restraint. They had no luck. So Rusbridger decided to call it a day. "I said, I think we just have to stop... We're about to come up to Christmas. We're all knackered. We're running out of material... Why don't we just bring down the curtain?" recalls Rusbridger.

On December 22, the *Guardian* officially announced that it would no longer claim exclusive use of the cables and was suspending daily release of new cable-related stories. "We just wanted to get it formally on the record, so that if anything happened we could point to that and say yes, but that period of exclusivity had stopped," notes Rusbridger. The paper had produced 349 stories since November 28, on an astonishing array of topics.⁵ That did not mean it stopped writing stories about WikiLeaks, or the cables and their repercussions; simply that the series and the exclusivity agreement with WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange was over.

The *Guardian's* relationship with Assange was also effectively over. By February 2011, Assange had decided that the *Guardian*, like the *New York Times*, was his enemy. He was particularly unhappy that the British publication had thoroughly covered his arrest, detention and the charges against him on sexual misconduct in Sweden. In February, he accused Rusbridger and others in the *Guardian* leadership of being part of a Jewish conspiracy (though Rusbridger is not Jewish).⁶ Those

³ For State Department assessment, see: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/jan/19/wikileaks-white-house-statedepartment>

⁴ Author's interview with Alan Rusbridger on March 8, 2011, in London. All further quotes from Rusbridger, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

⁵ For all *Guardian* stories related to the diplomatic cables, see: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/the-us-embassycables+tone/news>

⁶ For Assange's remarks on a Jewish conspiracy, see: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/mar/01/julian-assangejewish-conspiracy-comments>

at the *Guardian* who had worked with Assange on the several WikiLeaks stories felt the deal had run its course. As reporter Nick Davies says:

To credit Julian, it's his imagination, courage and hard work which built Wikileaks. It's brilliant. And then it's he that destroys it. WikiLeaks is supposed to be an organization that distributes secrets. As far as I know, the organization no longer exists because he alienated everybody who worked for it. And furthermore, it has no more secrets to distribute.⁷

Assange did not have an easy time of it after two Swedish women accused him in August 2010 of a sexual attack. The British government held Assange in prison for nine days in December, before releasing him on bail. Sweden sought his extradition, and in late February a UK court ruled against Assange, who appealed the case. His extradition appeal was to be heard in July 2011.

One aspect of the WikiLeaks saga which seemed likely to set a thriving precedent was the collaboration on a complex story among multiple news organization, despite differing languages, formats and deadlines. Rusbridger gives Assange, as well as his other partners, credit for a job well done:

We had had thrills. We'd had spills. We'd had disagreements. We'd had arguments. We'd had shouting matches. [Assange] disagreed with us over the breaking coverage. But I think you could look back on it and say, actually, amazing job. We've done it. No one's been harmed. We had done this amazing redaction process.

⁷ Author's interview with Nick Davies on March 8, 2011, in London. All further quotes from Davies, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.