



**Friend or Foe?:  
WikiLeaks and the *Guardian*  
Teaching Note**

**Case Summary**

In 2010, widespread debate erupted in the US and abroad over the impact of the whistleblower website WikiLeaks on 21<sup>st</sup> century governance, journalism and the relationship between the two. The decision by the British newspaper the *Guardian*, the US *New York Times* and the German magazine *Der Spiegel* to publish leaked diplomatic cables in partnership with WikiLeaks was especially contentious. Supporters hailed a new era of transparency and accountability; detractors decried the threat to US foreign relations; and journalists scrambled to discern whether WikiLeaks was a boon or a threat to their role as government watchdog.

This case looks especially at whether the *Guardian* and its partners should have published the classified cables. It also illustrates the kind of behind-the-scenes decisions that go into making sense out of a vast trove of sensitive documents like the diplomatic cables, and examines the many technical and ethical decisions editors had to make along the way.

The case briefly traces the *Guardian's* rise to prominence as an award-winning liberal newspaper with an especially strong web presence. In 2007, the *Guardian* begins an occasional collaboration with Julian Assange, founder of WikiLeaks, an organization devoted to providing an untraceable digital conduit for whistleblowers to publish incriminating documents. In the summer of 2010, *Guardian* investigative reporter Nick Davies again seeks out Assange and the two forge an agreement to review and publish four enormous stashes of official American documents acquired by Wikileaks from an anonymous source. The *Guardian* agrees to share the materials with the *New York Times* and *Der Spiegel*.

As *Guardian* staff and their international partners begin to sift through the first data set, known as the Afghan War Logs, they begin to realize the unprecedented logistical challenge of the project. The sensitivity of the documents demands all operations be conducted with utmost secrecy. UK privacy and official secrets legislation has halted publication of similar documents in the past, and the *Guardian* is anxious to avoid a repeat. But their sheer number—and the partnership with news outlets abroad—requires the involvement of a whole team of skilled reporters. Questions arise

over how and when to coordinate publication; how extensively to redact the documents; and how to avoid potential legal interference from governments.

With the July publication of the Afghan War Logs, however, Assange himself preemptively shared the documents with organizations outside the media partnership, thus blatantly violating the terms of his agreement with the *Guardian*. Editors face a series of choices about how to negotiate with an unpredictable source. These issues intensify as the *Guardian* struggles to sift through and publish the Iraq War Logs (October) and, especially, the enormous cache of US diplomatic cables. In particular, the *Guardian* has to decide whether or not to provide the cables to the *New York Times* against Assange's wishes.

Students get an inside look at the logistical and technological challenges that bedevil the process, and are left on the eve of publication with the question posed to *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger by a trusted long-time colleague: in their scramble to publish the cables, have *Guardian* editors forgotten to ask whether publication undermines the very ideals the left-leaning *Guardian* exists to champion?

## Teaching Objectives

Use this case to discuss government-media relations, especially on national security issues; the definition and nature of sources in the Internet era; the pros and cons of partnering with other news organizations, especially internationally; and the challenges of processing, organizing and vetting large troves of sensitive data.

The central question of this case is whether the *Guardian* should publish the cables at all. What responsibility does the press have when given access to government secrets? Is the calculus different if it is *your* government? How do editors distinguish between legitimate national security risks and a government's desire to avoid embarrassment? What about newspapers with an ideological identity like the *Guardian*—do they have any special responsibility to shield those with similar views?

It is difficult for editors to anticipate the possible repercussions of publishing stories—and perhaps it is not their job to do so. Ask students to consider whether news outlets are responsible for the repercussions of their coverage, not just on individuals, but also on international relations.

Use the case, too, to discuss how to define, and how to manage, sources. Assange presents an exaggerated version of a common problem: how to weigh a source's demands and the challenges of working with him against the value of his information. *Guardian* editors are willing to go a long way toward appeasing Assange because the diplomatic cables are journalistic gold to which he has sole access. But when it becomes apparent that Assange is reneging on terms of the agreement and threatening the exclusivity of their coverage, *Guardian* editors must decide whether they too are released from the bargain. Would they have felt so liberated absent the appearance of Heather Brooke and her copy of the cables? Do sources have rights?

Ask students to consider specific moments in the case when *Guardian* editors negotiate with Assange and whether or not they make the right decisions. Should Rusbridger have signed the letter

to Assange? Should Leigh have given the NYT the cables? Was Leigh right to keep his action secret from his editor? Ask too whether Assange is an editor, a journalist, a publisher, or a source—and the differences among those. How do we define those functions today?

Another central theme in the case is how to manage an international media partnership. Was the *Guardian* correct to seek such a partnership? Ask students to list the pros and cons (legal protection vs logistical nightmare). On the one hand, pooling resources seems essential for sorting through and redacting so much material—but it also creates additional challenges. Do debates over whether to publish specific cables and the difficulties of synchronizing publication across multiple languages and time zones only add to the difficulty of an already overwhelming task? Or are these multiple perspectives indispensable for a project of such scale and historical import?

Finally, use the case to discuss the logistical and technical requirements for making sense of huge troves of data. While the WikiLeaks cables may be an extreme example in terms of scale and sensitivity, navigating large data sets is becoming an increasingly common task for journalists. What tools do journalists need to be effective? Ask students to identify points in the case where they believe the *Guardian* staff made particularly good or bad choices about how to share work, monitor progress, manage redaction, and assign pieces of the project.

## Class Plan

Use this case in a class on government-media relations; managing sources; data journalism; editorial decisionmaking; or international reporting.

*Pre-class.* Help students prepare for class by assigning the following question:

1) In their rush to review, redact and coordinate publication of the WikiLeaks cables, did *Guardian* staff fail to consider adequately whether they should publish the cables at all?

Instructors may find it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to questions in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The instructor can use the students' work both to craft talking points ahead of class, and to identify particular students to call upon during the discussion.

*In-class questions:* The homework assignment is a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions to promote an 80/90 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

a) Did Rusbridger create sufficient opportunity for staff and himself to consider whether publishing the cables was desirable? What could he have done differently?

- b) Should Rusbridger and his team concern themselves with the consequences of publishing the cables, such as the implications for President Obama's re-election? Why or why not?
- c) Is the US government an adversary or a partner? Consider the different approaches of the European and US press in seeking government input. Is one preferable to the other?
- d) Managing sources is always a challenge, especially when the source has exclusive access to valuable information and is as mercurial as Assange. How well did *Guardian* staff manage their relationship with him? Identify key moments when they handled it well or could have done things differently.
- e) When Assange appears to break the terms of his agreement with the *Guardian* by sharing the cables with outside parties, some *Guardian* staffers argue that this releases them from the terms of the agreement as well. Is this a sound argument? Absent the Heather Brooke copy would the *Guardian* have felt released?
- f) Consider the arguments for and against sharing the cables with the *New York Times*. Was Leigh right to do so?
- g) What are the pros and cons of partnering with international media on a project like the WikiLeaks cables? List on board. Do the pros outweigh the cons?
- h) What are the key technical issues involved in making data dumps like the WikiLeaks cables useable? What resources are needed? How do you maximize efficiency without sacrificing precision or security?
- i) Look closely at the steps taken by the *Guardian* and its partners to ensure that they are redacting the cables responsibly. Are they being overly cautious—or not cautious enough?

## Suggested Readings

David Leigh and Luke Harding, *WikiLeaks; Inside Julian Assange's War on Secrecy*. The Guardian, 2011.

SYNOPSIS: In this book published by the *Guardian* after printing the WikiLeaks cables, two reporters prominently featured in this case document the rise of WikiLeaks and its partnership with the *Guardian*. It provides a detailed and entertaining overview of the larger story into which this case fits.

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Paul Grabowicz, "The transition to Digital Journalism: Databases, Data Visualizations and Map Mashups." Online tutorial. Knight Digital Media Center, updated June 4, 2011.

SYNOPSIS: In this online resource, Grabowicz discusses the rise of data journalism and the growing trend for news organizations to provide access to complete databases as well as new ways to reconfigure, organize, and visualize that data. The site also provides a bibliography of tools and articles available online related to data journalism.

<http://multimedia.journalism.berkeley.edu/tutorials/digital-transform/databases/>

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"Watchdog Conference: Reporters Wrestle with how to use sources: Reporters' Relationships with Sources." Nieman Reports, Fall 1999.

SYNOPSIS: In this report from a 1999 Harvard conference about the relationships between journalists and their sources, prominent journalists describe their personal approaches and recollect how they handled particularly difficult interactions with sources. Reading the various statements juxtaposed here reveals the lack of consensus among journalists about how to navigate their own and their sources' often conflicting agendas.

<http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/reports/article/102163/Reporters-Relationships-WithSources.aspx>

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WikiLeaks "About" page.

SYNOPSIS: This is a good place to start for more background on how WikiLeaks works as an anonymous drop box and how it conceives of its mission as both a partner to established media organizations and "a new model of journalism" in its own right. This page includes a list of stories broken by WikiLeaks and short essays about how some of them have had wide ranging effects. Browse the rest of the site for interviews with Julian Assange and, of course, archives of WikiLeaks documents and articles.

<http://wikileaks.org/About.html>

### **Critical opinion on WikiLeaks**

Todd Gitlin, "Everything is Data, but Data Isn't Everything." *The New Republic*, December 7, 2010.

SYNOPSIS: In this essay for *The New Republic*, Columbia Communications Professor Todd Gitlin styles himself a Wikileaks "agnostic," arguing that it is too soon to know the impact of the release of the diplomatic cables. He focuses instead on what distinguishes Assange's total transparency philosophy and indiscriminate release of data from the Pentagon Papers. He argues that in the latter case Daniel Ellsberg had a clear position vis-à-vis a particular US policy and released a coherent argument supporting that position. By contrast, Gitlin argues, Assange's driving philosophy is "his generation's anarchism—the kind that wears a black mask, values disruption as action, and thinks it imperative to obstruct the workings of international meetings."

<http://www.tnr.com/blog/foreign-policy/79678/data-isnt-everything-wikileaks-julian-assangedaniel-ellsberg>

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"Glenn Greenwald on Wikileaks." Interview, *Counterspin*. Fairness & Accuracy in Reporting, December 10, 2010.

SYNOPSIS: In this extended interview, civil rights lawyer and Salon.com columnist Glenn Greenwald presents arguments in strong support of WikiLeaks and vehemently criticizes the US government's response to the release of the cables. Greenwald has been one of WikiLeaks' most vocal defenders among the US media criterati, arguing that the mainstream media's coverage of the cables has been rife with errors, including the idea that the cables were indiscriminately dumped, unredacted, on Wikileaks's website (which this case clearly disproves). He further criticizes the media elite for siding with the US government in its criticism of Assange.

<http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=4210>

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Joseph Lieberman, "Lieberman Condemns New WikiLeaks Disclosures." Statement, November 28, 2010.

SYNOPSIS: In a resounding condemnation of the publication of the diplomatic cables, US Senator Lieberman (Indep-CT), who led the charge to introduce new legislation in response to the leak, states unequivocally, "Wikileaks' deliberate disclosure of these diplomatic cables is nothing less than an attack on the national security of the United States, as well as that of dozens of other countries... Let there be no doubt: the individuals responsible are going to have blood on their hands."

<http://lieberman.senate.gov/index.cfm/news-events/news/2010/11/lieberman-condemns-newwikileaks-disclosures>

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James P. Rubin, "The Irony of WikiLeaks: By threatening U.S. diplomacy, the hard left is undercutting its own worldview." *The New Republic*, December 1, 2010.

SYNOPSIS: In direct opposition to Greenwald's view, former Clinton State Department official James Rubin argues that the information released in the cables reveals that American diplomats' private communications largely mirror public positions (in other words, there's little to see here), but that by undermining trust between American foreign officials and their international counterparts, the cables decimate American diplomacy. Unlike efforts such as the Pentagon Papers where a higher principle justifies cutting through a culture of secrecy, he argues that the cables do far more harm than good.

<http://www.tnr.com/article/politics/79531/the-irony-wikileaks-american-diplomacy-hard-left>

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Clay Shirky. "WikiLeaks and the Long Haul." Blog entry, December 6, 2010.

SYNOPSIS: In this widely read blog entry social media theorist and NYU Professor Clay Shirky presents a measured assessment of the implications of WikiLeaks for a working democracy. He argues that some transparency in a democracy is essential for citizens to hold leaders to account. Yet complete transparency in diplomacy and negotiation is problematic because it interferes with actors' ability to change their positions without appearing weak: "And so we have a tension between two requirements for democratic statecraft, one that can't be resolved, but can be brought to an acceptable equilibrium."

### **On reporting national security secrets**

Leonard Downie Jr., "'Necessary Secrets: National Security, the Media, and the Rule of Law' by Gabriel Schoenfeld." *The Washington Post*, May 16, 2010.

SYNOPSIS: In this review of a book that the former *Washington Post* managing editor calls, "essential reading for anyone seriously interested in national security and freedom of the press in these testing times," Downie recaps in detail the book's argument that American media irresponsibly publishes national security information. Written in response to the *New York Times* (and others') 2005/06 revelation of secret Bush Administration antiterrorism programs, Schoenfeld argues that the justifications provided for publication pale alongside the Administration's national security claims. While praising the book's thorough research and tenacious reasoning, Downie rebuts its central claim. This book review is useful because it lays out both sides of the argument clearly and concisely.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/14/AR2010051402455.html>

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"Secrecy and Journalism in the New Media Age." Conference online resources page, Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University.

For its 2010 conference "Secrecy and Journalism in the New Media Age," Harvard's Nieman Foundation for Journalism collated articles on journalism and national security secrets from its *Nieman Reports* archive. All of the articles relate to this topic, but you may find "[A Digital Vision of Where Journalism and Government Will Intersect](#)" by Bill Allison, director of the government transparency advocacy organization The Sunlight Foundation, and Steven Aftergood's "Classified Documents: Secrecy vs. Citizenship" particularly relevant because they focus on how new media technologies make possible the accessing and dissemination of formerly secret data. Aftergood makes a case for providing original documents to readers whenever possible, while Allison discusses how digital tools are opening up new possibilities for data-based investigative reporting.

<http://www.nieman.harvard.edu/Microsites/SecrecyAndJournalismInTheNewMediaAge/Resources.aspx>

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Rachel Smolkin, "Judgment Calls: How top editors decide whether to publish national security stories based on classified information." *American Journalism Review*, October/November 2006.

SYNOPSIS: Smolkin's article recaps the controversy surrounding the *New York Times* and other publications' decision to publish stories exposing the Bush Administration's secret antiterrorism programs in 2005/06. Questions and accusations that arose in the wake of those stories were very similar to those made in the WikiLeaks cablegate scenario: the papers were accused of treason by some and hailed as patriots by others. Based on interviews with top editors at the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and other publications, this piece outlines their internal procedures for deciding when and how to publish material the government deems threatening to national security.

<http://www.ajr.org/Article.asp?id=4185>