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The ‘Wikileaks Effect’: Information Warfare and ‘Battle for the Truth’

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Synopsis

In the ‘Battle for the Truth’, the diffused power of information sharing in the Internet age can pose more than a mere inconvenience for national governments. What should be done to deal with the fallout?

Commentary

ON 25 July 2010, the Guardian, the New York Times and Der Spiegel published simultaneous reports on the ‘Afghan War Diary’, a collection of more than 91,000 classified reports on the war in Afghanistan furnished by WikiLeaks. These documents reportedly covered the January 2004 to December 2009 period of the war in Afghanistan. Since then, hundreds of thousands of United States diplomatic cables have been leaked by WikiLeaks, the whistle-blower website, to a wider array of news groups including the Sydney Morning Herald.

Viewed by some as the ‘New Robin Hood’ battling for greater government transparency, the actions of Julian Assange, founder of WikiLeaks, have inspired a network of likeminded supporters and activists. These include ‘Anonymous’, a group of pro-WikiLeaks ‘hacktivists’ responsible for Operation Payback – a botnet campaign on service providers that have withdrawn their support for WikiLeaks. The magnitude of the ‘Wikileaks effect’, both in the nature of the leaked documents and the immediate response from likeminded supporters and activists, however hides three important facts:

The Wikileaks Effect

Firstly, many of the leaked documents do not intrinsically challenge what we already know from extant open sources. Secondly, many of the leaked documents are based on poorly sourced ground-level reports. Thirdly, WikiLeaks is designed not merely to inform but also influence its target audience at the expense of national governments.

Therefore, it is imperative that governments should come to grips with the ‘Wikileaks effect’ – a free-floating ideology based on an apparent ‘Battle for the Truth’ propelled by a diffused network of legal and illegal Internet-based activists and supporters. The ‘Wikileaks effect’ creates an illusion that something is being done ‘For the Truth’ -- even when such actions (often non-violent but illegal) threaten to destabilise international security and stability.

In a BBC report on the ‘Afghan War Diary’, Assange claimed that since all ‘Afghan War Diary’ material is over seven months old, it is of “no current operational consequence, even though it may be of very significant

investigative consequence". The message sent to members of the armed services is clear – we appreciate the efforts of the troops but not the governments that put you in harm's way. Nonetheless, this implied support for the troops has not been so consistent – particularly when juxtaposed against leaked footage of AH-64 Apache attack helicopter strikes on suspected Iraqi insurgents in Bagdad on 12 July 2007.

The airstrike resulted in the deaths of several Iraqi civilians including women and children. The leaked video of the airstrike made available on Wikileaks in April 2010 was labelled with the title 'Collateral Murder'. The preface to the leaked video did not provide the context leading to the airstrike in which an infantry company received incoming fire all morning from small arms and rocket propelled grenades. The manner in which the 'Collateral Murder' video was put together and released was a gross misrepresentation of actual events. Indeed, on several occasions, Wikileaks has been criticised for its lack of credibility. Nonetheless, this does not prevent Wikileaks from receiving support across sections of a global community disgruntled with the actions of their governments.

Battle for Moral High Ground

In the battle for the moral high ground, Wikileaks has been able to exploit its 'whistle-blowing' underdog status. Wikileaks' self-proclaimed primary interest "to reveal unethical behaviour in their governments" is a message that strikes a visceral cord with anti-establishment sentiment worldwide. Wikileaks postings are designed for maximum visceral and political impact. Titles such as 'Collateral Murder' and truncated video clips that do not provide the full context of events but play on the conscience of target audiences is part of a sophisticated strategy. The goal is to win the moral high ground without the more complex considerations faced by national governments.

Notwithstanding their questionable veracity and context, the 'Afghan War Diary' and the series of recently leaked US diplomatic cables have stirred up emotions that resonate with many ordinary citizens of the world. These visceral emotions, often couched in idealistic moral terms, have the potential of undermining the relationships between friendly countries, coalition partners and their respective electorates. As exemplified by comments in Der Spiegel, the electorates of European coalition partners in Afghanistan such as Germany are particularly sensitive to any allegations of immoral conduct in Afghanistan.

What Needs to be Done

In response, national governments do need to communicate the credibility of their actions in a more effective and timely manner. Government agencies are aware of the immense potential of new media --- particularly reaching out to a younger demographic across social networking sites. Nonetheless, the inherent complexity of government bureaucracy often means that non-state actors such as Wikileaks are usually one step ahead of the game. Like a loosely organised insurgent movement, Wikileaks often strikes 'First with the Truth', leaving government agencies grappling with a highly diffused aftermath.

Unlike national governments, Wikileaks is not bound by the complexities and norms inherent in the conduct of foreign policy – an asymmetry exploited by Wikileaks to full advantage. In order to challenge the 'Wikileaks effect', government agencies have to reconsider the definition of 'need to know', 'when to know' and 'what to know' when it comes to information sharing in the public domain.

Comprehensively, national governments have to demonstrate that their intent and actions are more credible than those of their non-state opponents – particularly when collaborating as a coalition of nations on issues of common interest. To ignore the realities of the 'Wikileaks effect' will further erode the credibility of national governments. It will also undo the progress that the international community has made in the enhancement of international security and stability.

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