



Webwar: Wikileaks and the Ethics of Information

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Wikileaks have released classified US diplomatic cables which raise some ethical question. This question revolves around the uneasy relationship between freedom of information and national security. In the Philippines, journalists and broadcasters have been pushing for the passage of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Bill in the Congress but with the sudden breakthrough of the Weakileak in the media, the government with the suggestion of the military has carefully revisited the Bill and drafted a Malacanang version of the FOI. The proponents and defenders of Wikileaks argue that this information provides people with the disclosure of truth while critics and opponents of the Wikileaks insist that this information is detrimental to diplomatic relationships. Wikileaks open the secrets of the US in the world that would expose the US Foreign Policy and Diplomatic Relation to shame. We know that Information is a source of power. With information, people are enlightened with the issue and empowered to make decisions. If this information is held back by the government, then people are left ignorant on issues that affect them. Nevertheless, the Wikileaks should be accountable for the information that they release to the public.

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We have entered the era of information technology where knowledge becomes a valuable good. In this era, knowledge is power and whoever holds knowledge wields power. Since becoming embroiled in the war against terrorism, the US government has transformed itself into a huge security apparatus. Recently, Wikileaks disclosed

the secret of the US that exposed its foreign policy and diplomatic relations in the world. Wikileaks uses digital technology as a tool for social change by means of disclosure of information which tries to discredit abusive regimes. As a tool for change, Wikileaks endeavors to make the world more secure, safe, transparent and accountable. For instance, the Wikileaks released videos of the US airstrikes that killed a dozen of innocent Iraqi civilians. The US government was not just exposed to embarrassment but, more importantly, the atrocity inflicted on these people. The cables leaked by a State Department source, illustrate not only the abuse of military forces in foreign lands but also the collusion between US governmental and corporate power.

Julian Assange views state conspiracies as closed systems of expert decision and executive action that operate in isolation from the outside, thus negating the structural interconnectedness of people that ensures political transparency. The issue is not just the embarrassment of the states concerned but the wider destabilization of traditional modes of information control to the public. Thus, the relevant debate should steer away from individual personalities or websites and instead focus on the broader picture on the political control of information dissemination. There is a paradox of public sphere: even if everyone knows an unpleasant fact, saying it in public changes everything. Wikileaks challenges power structure by disrupting the normal channels of information. The aim of Wikileaks is not just to embarrass those in power but to mobilize the public to create an open government motivated by transparency and accountability and beyond the limits imposed by representative democracy.

Wikileaks has released classified US diplomatic cables to the internet and media which raise some ethical questions. The debate on Wikileaks focuses on the demarcation line between the right of freedom of information and the interest of national security. If the secrecy of administrative documents is used to cover up government atrocities committed against innocent people, there must be ethical grounds to overcome such formal borders of secrecy. This has been seen as a defensible way to protect democratic society and citizens against secret arbitrary government power. The task of disseminating information in an unimpeded manner is clearly essential to the functioning of a vibrant democracy. It is only the full-fledged ability of all citizens to have access to information, in principle, which makes the formation of public opinion possible. Moreover, there is no such thing as the protection of state privacy since the state, unlike its citizens, has no private sphere. The rights of citizens deserve protection, but the internal affairs of the government do not. If the state derives its democratic authority from citizens, then providing information to them becomes a civil duty. The breach of secrecy

becomes a mark of the quality of a democracy. Government by conspiracy and secrecy depend on concealment and deception. The US demonizing and hunting Wikileaks reveals a profound hatred for democracy on the part of US political leadership. The supporters and defenders of Wikileaks argue that this information provides people with knowledge so that they will be informed of the activities of their governments.

The world is moving irreversibly in the direction of openness. Secrecy in the government is ultimately an affront to the people. Information should be free. Information should not be hoarded by the powerful elite but opened to public scrutiny. Because information is public data, it belongs to the public domain. Wikileaks strives for an open government by means of access to information. The world with the Wikileaks will be more insecure and threatening for military superpowers who wage aggression and occupation of other countries using dubious, if not contrived intelligence report. It will also be less secure for governments that send their young men and women to fight and die in foreign lands cloaked in a cause based on lies and deceit, when the real interest remains the profit of oil companies and weapon industries. Wikileaks will topple down secrecy and confidentiality on inhuman practices of governments. Wikileaks achieves what the mass media is supposed to achieve in an open democracy. ■

