



KEVIN O'NEILL / STAFF ARTIST

Spilling secrets?

Website's war coverage sparks security concerns

Some call **WikiLeaks.org** journalism while others call it treason. The site operates in a grey area somewhere between those points. WikiLeaks posts information provided by anonymous whistle-blowers from governments and businesses, some of it classified as secret.

The site made international news recently with its publication of almost 400,000 secret military logs pertaining to the Iraq war.

Past postings include classified Pentagon documents on the war in Afghanistan and video from a U.S. military helicopter gunning down 12 unarmed people in Iraq, including two Reuters journalists.

WikiLeaks has gained enough credibility that its postings are reported worldwide by major news services, such as the Associated Press. The New York Times recently ran an article on the site's founder, Australia native Julian Assange. In it, he claims the notoriety the site has brought him has forced him to live life on the run, with government intelligence agencies targeting him, allegations of rape in Sweden and numerous defections from his staff.

Is it journalism?

The site claims to have provided a "new model of journalism" with the stated goal "to bring important news and information to the public." It has managed to bring important information to the public. Some of the stories that have been gleaned from the Iraq documents tell of thousands more civilian deaths than previously reported, including some at the hands of U.S. troops. There are assassination plots against Iraqi officials and military officers, and reports of Iranians moving weapons and explosives across the border.

Journalists should report the

news in an unbiased manner, leaving their opinions for the editorial section. WikiLeaks fails in this regard with its bias against the military apparent in its reporting. The following excerpts from the site demonstrate this:

"... other journalists try to verify sources. We don't do that, we verify documents. We don't care where it came from — but we can guess that it probably came from somewhere in the U.S. military or the U.S. government, from someone who is disaffected. Clearly, a heroic act by the whistle-blower."

"... troops are in a field, they see some unexploded ordnance. They could leave it alone or shoot it with their guns but for some reason, probably because they're bored, they call in an airstrike."

In the first excerpt, it's naive to assume every whistle-blower is performing a "heroic act." They may just be disgruntled — or they may be traitors. In the second excerpt, it's presumptuous for the writer to assume he knows the state of mind of the troops involved. I don't know the procedures the military has for dealing with unexploded ordnance, but I'm pretty sure leaving them alone isn't an option, and maybe an airstrike is a valid method for destroying them.

Is it treason?

War is a brutal and ugly endeavor, and a soldier's job is to kill the enemy and destroy their capacity to fight. Even in the violence and chaos of war though, there are lines that should not be crossed. Secrecy is a necessary element in fighting a war, and those who reveal secrets to the enemy put lives at risk.

But not all information needs to be secret, and the military has an obligation to be honest with the public when it decides to speak. Soldiers also have an obligation to conduct themselves with honor. Unfortunately, the Pentagon has shown repeatedly that it can't always be trusted to tell the truth, as evidenced by the Pat Tillman debacle. And in every war since the beginning of time, some

soldiers have committed atrocities, such as at Abu Ghraib.

An independent press is necessary to monitor wars in an attempt to minimize deception and brutality. Responsible news organizations don't publish information that endangers troops or intelligence sources in the field. Birgitta Jonsdottir, a WikiLeaks staffer and member of Iceland's Parliament, claims in the New York Times' article that Mr. Assange published names of NATO intelligence sources in the Afghan documents. I don't know if it's treason, but it's definitely irresponsible.

Is it necessary?

WikiLeaks has an anonymous drop box where whistle-blowers can submit documents, although it is currently closed for "re-engineering." It supposedly has secure encryption, and not even the site operators can find the identity of those who submit information. You can also submit documents by mail.

After receiving documents they consider worth posting, the site's staff conducts a thorough verification process to make sure the information is authentic. Currently, the Iraq and Afghanistan documents are up on the site. An archive of past postings on the site would be nice, but there is none.

The documents are organized by categories and are searchable. Many of the reports are hard to read because they've been heavily redacted, leaving almost as many blank spaces as there are words.

It's important for whistle-blowers to have a secure place to share information that the public should know about. The raw reports on the site provide significant details that shed light on important events. Where WikiLeaks falls short is in its biased writing masked as journalism and overzealous disclosure of some information that should be kept secret.

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