

Wikileaks: Play the Ball, not the Man - and Check Who's Kicking it

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'When people write political commentary on blogs or other social media, it is my experience that it is not — with some exceptions — their goal to expose the truth. Rather, it is their goal to position themselves among their peers on whatever the issue of the day is. The most effective, the most economical way to do that is simply to take the story that's going around — it has already created a marketable audience for itself — and say whether they're in favor of that interpretation or not.'[1]

So said Julian Assange in an interview with Time magazine on 30 November, presumably to justify why he chose to release Cablegate through the very mainstream media whose ineptitude, bias, and lack of courage purportedly necessitated the formation of Wikileaks in the first place.

But even that description does not quite do him justice. Assange has gone further than providing the story -or selected excerpts at least - he has also created the market, through deals with major media players and hidden financial backers,[2] and intends it to be played out for some time through protracted releases.

With few exceptions the majority of the public, but more worryingly, many supposed investigative and/or independent journalists, have dismally failed to exercise even the most minimum capacity for critical assessment, either talking-up the revelations (many of which were already common knowledge, or should have been to journalists doing their job properly) and/or participating in the indecent stampede to lionise Assange as some great champion of freedom of information and open government - or both.

This, like the cables themselves, conveniently deflects attention from the real issues - the right to information, the desirability of open government, the protection of whistle-blowing, and the protection for individuals from state abuses of the judiciary for political purposes. Moreover it achieves this deflection not by presenting all of the information in its original form, which might conceivably pass as a search for truth, but by presenting selected and redacted information, ie spin, which does *not* pass as a search for truth. The protracted nature of the releases suggests an eye on income, as well as keeping the world's attention distracted from any and everything else, like, perhaps, the next Operation Cast Lead.

It has, however, nicely positioned Assange amongst his peers.

On 30 November I sent an email to a friend in Mexico, with several concerns I had about the cables, relating to three 'who's - who they were being released through, who was not mentioned (Israel) and who would suffer most through the releases. My friend responded

that there was no point in further communicating with me. It seemed the mere suggestion that Julian Assange might not be the Che Guevara of information liberation was reason enough for my immediate exile!

But even before Cablegate, people were questioning who was behind Wikileaks.[3] Many experienced Wikileaks people themselves were becoming increasingly disturbed with its manner of operation,[4] and have since bailed out.[5]

So what's Assange's game?

According to him, keeping governments open by disseminating 'public interest' information through selected media outlets. Since beginning this piece, SCOOP has published an article by Michel Chossudovsky that makes many of the points I did about the media selected to edit the material, so I won't repeat them - you can read them for yourself here.[6] However, I do make a couple of additional points:

1. In releasing the information to these 'architects of media disinformation' as Chossudovsky describes them, Assange is implicitly saying that we the public are too stupid, moronic, or ignorant to be able to assess and analyse the contents for ourselves, and/or
2. these 'architects of media disinformation' must be given the opportunity to put their spin on it because God forbid we might come to our own, possibly different, conclusions, and
3. this spin includes presenting the cables as if everything they contain is the truth, i.e. that what some US staffer said that a particular person in Iran or Turkey or Australia thinks/said/did is actually what that person thinks/said/did. (How many journalists have bothered to go to the supposed source, let alone subject, of any of these cables to verify the accuracy of the contents?)

One thing that tends to annoy people as much as being lied to by their governments, is being patronised. (Now that's a thought for the lionisers - make Assange the patron saint of disinformation.... you can spin that either way)

As for the claim that Assange/Wikileaks has revolutionised information-sharing, yes, we do now have available a plethora of information, some of which is very important, but most of which is nothing new, or even particularly interesting. Worse, we also have yet another player in the spoon-feeding frenzy that passes for mainstream journalism - that is, instead of vested interests and States spooning it to a lap-dog media who then spoon it to us, we now have Assange/Wikileaks forking it to the media, who are forking us - business as usual. And for some inexplicable reason we are expected to hail Assange as the objective, independent champion of freedom of information and the truth. Why? Because he says he is.

Assange's record on these fronts is not too great. Compare his operational procedures to those of Openleaks and note the difference between 'limitless sharing' and selective release. Look also at objectivity and independence. Chossudovsky quotes Assange as stating that Wikileaks' primary focus is on 'oppressive regimes in Asia, the former Soviet bloc, Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.' Which country out of all in these areas has the most United Nations Resolutions against it for breaches of international law and human rights abuses? Israel. Which country is not only almost completely absent from Cablegate,

but whose Prime Minister also comes in for some flattery from Assange in the 30 November Time interview? Israel. Whose Prime Minister said the leaks were good for Israel? Israel's! Netanyahu went so far as to say that 'Israel had worked in advance to limit any damage from leaks' [7] Reports of deals struck with Israel in Geneva [8] don't sound so far-fetched after all. So much for independence.

As a champion of freedom of information and open government he might have been expected to fare somewhat better. But hasn't he just succeeded in doing the very opposite? Assange said in the Time interview that 'If their behavior is revealed to the public, they have one of two choices: one is to reform in such a way that they can be proud of their endeavors, and proud to display them to the public. Or the other is to lock down internally and to balkanize, and as a result, of course, cease to be as efficient as they were.' [9]

What does he mean by 'less efficient'... internal lockdown and balkanization is probably the most efficient method of keeping information from the public - and is exactly what we are seeing in the aftermath of the latest releases. As a strategy to increase openness, it is achieving the opposite.

And why is he so selective in which governments he keeps 'open'? According to his ex-deputy, Assange is the only one to have the key, or password, to the Tel Aviv embassy cables relating to the 2006 Lebanon assault and the 2008-9 Gaza invasion. In fact, of some 4000 cables from the Tel Aviv embassy only 22 have seen the light of day. [10] As Chossudovsky also noticed, Assange's target countries could well pass for a summary of US foreign policy interests. The best indication of who or what is behind this selectivity is the omissions - they are far more telling than anything in the cables. Which is the only country to come out of Wikileaks smelling like roses? Yes, Israel.

Which leaves only the truth, and I fear we are yet to hear it.

Whether all the activists and supporters demonstrating outside courtrooms and various other localities around the world are victims of '*sophisticated counterintelligence tactics designed to manipulate the unwitting*' [11] is in some senses irrelevant. If they are demonstrating against the suppression of information, against governments lying to their citizens, against the persecution of whistleblowers, and against the abuse of judicial processes for political purposes they are making valid and justified demands, all laudable goals for Wikileaks.

If they are claiming that Julian Assange is an uncorrupted example of them that is quite another - possibly very erroneous - matter.

We would all do well to keep this distinction centre-table.

It would be far easier to fully support Julian Assange if he weren't suppressing information himself, and was demanding openness from every government, not just those he doesn't like. It would be not only easier, but essential, to give him our total support if it were clear that he was a genuine whistleblower, and not Israel's stooge - or even a bit of both.

Unless and until the Tel Aviv cables are released, we will not know. Unless and until Wikileaks's funding sources are as open and transparent as we demand Governments to be, we will not know.

About the only thing the evidence suggests Assange deserves unequivocal support for is as

a victim of a rendition attempt by the United States, aided and abetted by Sweden.

But you don't need me to tell you - read the footnotes below and their footnotes, and anything else you can get your hands on - and take a stab at coming to your own conclusions - it beats being spoon-fed, or forked over.

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